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## Miscellanea

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## Miscellanea

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### Concerning the Lutheran Free Churches in Germany

By H. SASSE of Erlangen<sup>1</sup>

#### I

The catastrophe of 1945 has compelled German Lutheranism to re-examine its foundation and re-think its church polity. Lutheran *theology* finds itself compelled to examine the question how far it deviated from Scripture and the Confessions in the doctrine of the natural orders and how far it had made unwarranted concessions to the *Zeitgeist*. The Lutheran churches must ask themselves to what extent they are responsible before God and man in the erection and approval of the totalitarian state. This is true of all churches, the State as well as the Free Churches from Breslau to Missouri. The unnecessary obeisance which several Free Churches made before Hitler, both at synodical meetings and in their publications, does not differ essentially from the deference to Hitler of which Bishop Marahrens is accused and of which the Roman Catholic bishops are guilty. But we all, leaders and subordinates, live in glass houses, and everyone must examine himself as to the extent of his guilt in this matter. The reconstruction of the Lutheran Church must begin with repentance. Every attempt

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<sup>1</sup> A number of questions concerning the future of the Free Churches had been submitted to Dr. H. Sasse of Erlangen. In spite of his illness, the illness of Mrs. Sasse, and new duties at the university, Dr. Sasse found time and the necessary strength (June, 1946) to answer these questions in the hope that his observations might prove helpful in solving the problems of Lutheranism in Germany. We believe that Dr. Sasse's analysis of Free Churchism will aid American Lutherans to evaluate the place and purpose of the Free Churches in the reconstruction program. Our readers will appreciate the fact that these observations are written by one who is a member of the State Church and yet very close to the Free Churches and that some of his statements are not applicable in their entirety to the situation in the American Lutheran Church. The sweeping statement in Paragraph VI concerning the danger of new doctrinal statements requires some modification and explanation when applied to our American conditions. It is true that the Lutheran Confessions are a sufficient basis for Lutheran union. But there must also be a clarification of such antitheses as are not discussed in the Lutheran Confessions. Modern doctrinal statements are necessary as guidelines for doctrinal discussions on controverted points and as satisfactory summations of such discussions. On the basis of personal interviews with Dr. Sasse we are convinced that his remarks on Inspiration in Paragraph VII are not to be interpreted as a denial of plenary verbal inspiration, but rather as a rejection of any man-made theory which attempts to explain the mystery of Inspiration or which threatens to eliminate the "human element" in the divinely inspired writers. . . . We have condensed Dr. Sasse's manuscript slightly, though we have tried to reproduce the German as faithfully as possible. The footnotes are observations of the translator.

F. E. M.

to excuse or mitigate our guilt only impedes the regeneration of the Lutheran Church in Germany. The Free Churches, too, must bow before God and confess their guilt.

## II

There is a unity of German Lutheranism in spite of the many divergencies. This unity is based on the unanimous subscription to the Lutheran Confessions and the unanimous feeling of responsibility to defend this Confession before the world and before the other denominations. The Lutheran State Churches, therefore, cannot be indifferent toward the Free Church movement. Conversely, the Free Church must have a vital interest in, and a responsibility toward, the Lutheran State Churches (*Landeskirchentum*). The fate of both will determine the development of that Lutheranism which is still in the fetters of the un-Lutheran union, but which shows unsuspected signs of a Lutheran revival.<sup>2</sup> The unity and the reciprocal responsibility for one another is a lesson which German Lutheranism as a whole must learn.

## III

The State Lutheranism is finally on the way to achieve an organic union. Until now the attempt to establish a *corpus Lutheranorum* was frustrated by the colossus of the Prussian Union. Of course, the Lutherans must realize that for some time to come the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (VELKD) will be a Lutheran Church in name only. Even the majority of the pastors in the Lutheran Provincial Churches have no real understanding of the Lutheran Confessions as a result of their theological training, which does not differ from that of the union Church. How can they know the essence of true Lutheranism? They are guilty — not so much of unionism as — of ignorance. The same is true of the congregations. How can the laity be confessionally conscious as long as members are transferred from Lutheran to union congregations without any instructions, merely on the assumption that both are evangelical? How can one expect

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. O. Dibelius, bishop of the Berlin-Brandenburg section of the former Prussian Union, assured President Petersen and me that he is endeavoring to re-organize his Church on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions; that he will no longer ordain pastors on a compromise formula; and that he already had taken several steps which indicate clearly his desire to terminate the Prussian Union. The isolation of the Russian sector reduces the influence of Reformed theology in the former stronghold of the unionistic Church. True, Bishop Dibelius is far from establishing a clear line of demarcation, as was evident from his article on Union in his official paper. — We are reliably informed that President Bender of the Baden Church introduced Luther's Catechism in his province, where formerly the Heidelberg Catechism had been used. Dr. H. Asmussen told us that upon his suggestion the *Bruderrat* of the EKID, consisting of six Lutheran, four Evangelical, and two Reformed theologians, resolved to study the Augustana in its sessions and jointly examine not only Article XIII (Sacraments), but also the remaining 17 doctrinal articles.

Lutheran congregations to take action against notorious errorists in the pulpit as long as they permit notorious errorists to train the clergy? How can there be a true confessional consciousness if a theological faculty, which according to its charter is Lutheran, permits not only *Unierte* and Reformed, but even a Catholic, though she expressly stated her Catholic conviction, to attend the Lord's Supper at a "Lutheran faculty service"? I say, how can under such conditions true Lutheranism be established immediately? However, we must acknowledge the fact with gratitude that the understanding of Christian doctrine in the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKiD) has made considerable progress and that the EKiD, which had been organized by the *de iure* Lutheran bishop of Wuerttemberg, is recognized more and more merely as a federation.<sup>3</sup> But it will take a long time until the VELKD will be truly Lutheran, *de facto* as well as *de iure*. All Lutherans share in the responsibility of making the VELKD truly Lutheran in fact as well as in name.

#### IV

The Free Churches have been affected by the collapse of Germany more seriously than the State Churches. What is to become of these small churches, especially of the Prussian Church (Breslau Synod)?<sup>4</sup> Shall they forfeit the right of separate existence in view of the fact that a United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany will be established? They dare not do this, unless they would become unfaithful to their divinely appointed task and to the principle for which they have until now fought so valiantly. They

<sup>3</sup> The fact is that many hope to make the temporary and emergency organization known as EKiD the permanent Church, though at present it is only a federation of the various independent provincial churches. If the EKiD were to become a Church, then this union Church would comprise Lutherans, Reformed, and Evangelicals, and its unionism would surpass that of the old Prussian Union. The Lutheran provincial churches, especially the Bavarian Church under Bishop Meiser, are opposed to such a move, since it would mean the end of Lutheranism in Germany. Many of the younger theologians, however, claim that in their opposition to Nazism's neopaganism they found a common ground for a confession, though they were not confessionally united. As members of the Confessing Church they were willing to suffer martyrdom in their common faith as members of the *una sancta*, and they will not now permit the erection of "theological and denominational fences" to separate them into confessional groups. Only recently a group of 44 theologians in Western Germany published a statement in which they deplored the "rise of confessional narrowness and theological domination" and declared "that it would be detestable if the fruits of hard times are destroyed and nipped in the bud in favor of a return to tradition." They are "dismayed that many church leaders are dissipating their energies in confessional efforts." (*R.N.S.*, 10/14/46.)

<sup>4</sup> The largest Lutheran Free Church, the Breslau Synod, whose strength was chiefly in the Eastern provinces, has suffered almost irreparable losses, its congregations are scattered, and its members pauperized. But there are Breslau congregations in the Russian, American, and British sectors, numbering possibly 30,000 members. The "Saxon" Free Church likewise is represented in all sectors of Germany. The remaining six Free Churches are numerically small.

can forfeit their separate existence only if and when the VELKD has become Lutheran, not only *de iure*, but also *de facto*; when it exercises doctrinal discipline; and when its present union with the Reformed and Evangelicals in the EKID is recognized as no more than a federation for the solution of certain common problems without any kind of fellowship. Until then the Lutheran Free Churches must go their difficult and lonely way, not only for their own sake, but also in the interest of State Churchism. As far as man can judge, the weak and despised Free Church has saved Lutheranism in the State Churches as far as it can be saved. It has served as the conscience of the State Churches. Without the Breslau Synod the entire development of the Prussian Union would have been different. That 90% of the congregations in the old Prussian Union still have the Lutheran Confessions *de iure* and that Lutheranism is at present experiencing a renaissance, is probably due to the effective influence of the Prussian Free Church. And the fact that Baden today has a president who is a better Lutheran than many Lutheran church leaders, is probably due to the fact that in Baden a poor, weak, and "sectarian" Lutheran Free Church remained faithful at its lonely post. The Free Churches must be retained, especially there where the union is not as yet experiencing the process of dissolution. Where else shall the Lutherans in those territories go to partake of Holy Communion?

## V

The important question is how the Free Churches are to continue. The old form of existence is past. Prussia has been removed from current history, and therefore there can be no Prussian Free Church. The Hessian *Renitenz* has been so intimately woven into the history and peculiar tradition of its territory that it probably will remain as a special group until it will be absorbed by the Hessian Church. Therefore only the remnants of the Prussian Free Church (Breslau Synod), the Free Churches in Hannover, Hesse, and Baden come into consideration. These could unite at once, for there are no doctrinal differences to warrant a separate existence, and the practical problems of church government can be solved. More difficult is the question whether a union of these groups with the Saxon Free Church is possible.<sup>5</sup> A fundamental observation is in place: The attempt to put into practice Augustana VII (the requirement for the unity of the Church) proved

<sup>5</sup> Several years ago the seven Free Churches had established a federation. The present union movement was initiated between the Breslau and the Saxon Churches in part at the suggestion of Dr. Behnken, and the doctrinal discussions have been progressing satisfactorily both in the Russian sector and in the Western zones. During the past summer the remaining Free Churches were invited to participate. Two meetings have been held, one at Hermannsburg in July and one in Gross-Oesingen in October. The theological discussions have centered around the *principium cognoscendi* in theology, and according to recent reports satisfactory progress has been made.

the cause of division in Lutheranism. No more effective argument against the *satis est* of this article could ever have been found than the fact that there was not even pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship between those who accept the Book of Concord. We must understand clearly that the Lutheran Church will find a hearing among other denominations and will be able to fulfill its commission only when this "scandal" has been removed. For that reason we Lutherans have the duty to confer with one another, to seek a new relation to one another, and to attempt to remove the schism. Likewise in the formation of a new Lutheran Free Church in Germany nothing must be left untried to gain all Free Churches for the union. How can the Free Churches really undertake a mission program if they erect opposing altars in the same city? On the ruins of our destroyed cities and in view of God's judgments our churches must approach their problems in a new spirit. May God help us not to forget this lesson!

## VI

If the two trends in the Free Churches (the Saxon and the other seven Free Churches) are to find a union, they must proceed from the following premises. Nothing will be gained if the existing differences are minimized or glossed over with formulae though theologically correct but in reality failing to cope with the real conflicts. We must apply to ourselves the warnings which we have issued to others: No compromises! Nor shall we attempt to suppress one another. The new Lutheran Free Church cannot and will not bear the stamp of the Breslau Synod, nor can it be Missouriian. The Church will be something new, or it will not exist at all. It must avoid the mistakes of both. The new Church must be broad-minded in the sense of the Formula of Concord, in which the objectives of Gnesio-Lutheranism were fused with the good elements in Melancthonianism. The strength of the Saxon Free Church is its confessional consciousness. Its mistake has been the narrow-mindedness of its "theological school." The strength of the Prussian Church (Breslau) was the consciousness of its solidarity with the entire Lutheran Church of Germany and the resultant broad-mindedness (*Weitherzigkeit*). Its mistake was that in decisive moments it failed to separate from false Lutheranism, though love for the truth had made such separation necessary. Is it possible to preserve the strong point of each group without continuing the mistakes? This is possible only if both sides are agreed as to the real foundation of the union: not a new doctrinal declaration, a sort of Free Church Lutheran "Barmen," according to which the old Confessions are to be interpreted, but the Scriptures and the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church. Paraphrasing Walther, we ought to speak where the Confessions speak and be silent where the Confessions are silent. Only in this way will the *satis est* of the Augustana be fully recognized. Failure to unite on the basis of the Confessions is an admission that they have lost their unifying power. There is danger in new doctrinal statements.

## VII

There are primarily two theological questions which separate the two trends of the Free Churches: the office of the ministry and the inspiration of the Scriptures.

1. The fact of the long controversies concerning this point is proof that the Reformation has not spoken the last word on this point and that the Confessions are abused if one would find a definite statement of the doctrine, be it of Vilmar or that of Walther. We are at a point where the theological terms of the nineteenth century are insufficient. Neither Vilmar's concept of the office nor Walther's concept of the congregation exhaust the actual Biblical and Confessional statements. To continue this debate has no purpose. Not until the teachings of Scripture and of the Confessions are restudied will progress be made. Questions for further study are points such as the following: The New Testament presents the twelve Apostles as the bearers of the office and the representatives of the Church; the Office of the Keys is given to Peter (Matthew 16), to the Church (Matthew 18), and to the Apostles (John 20); the concept of "local congregation" as used in the nineteenth century is unknown in the New Testament. Due respect for the work of the fathers of our Church of the nineteenth century, which certainly was not futile! Nevertheless, we must make a new beginning at this point.

2. The same is true of the question of Inspiration. Our Confessions have no dogmatical statement on this doctrine. This is not to be interpreted as an oversight which we must rectify, as the Roman Catholic Church has done. Otherwise we would have to formulate a new confession binding for the whole Lutheran Church. This is impossible. The adherents of the inspiration doctrine must ask themselves whether they are willing to let the unity of the Lutheran Church go to pieces on this doctrine. Furthermore, it must be clearly understood that in its doctrine of verbal inspiration Lutheran orthodoxy really intended to safeguard the Holy Scriptures, the entire Holy Scriptures, as God's Word against the arbitrary interpretation of men. In this, orthodoxy was correct, for the Holy Scripture is God's Word, nor dare it ever be questioned that the entire Scripture is *theopneustos*. And when Missouri Lutheranism today reminds us of this, it is doing us a noble service, for it cannot be denied that a large portion of Lutheranism has succumbed to the modernistic maltreatment of Scripture and its authority. The helplessness of the Church over against the sects and Rome is evidence that many sections of the Lutheran Church have lost the *sola Scriptura*. The question is, however, whether the inspiration doctrine of the fathers will help us in our dilemma; whether this doctrine is sufficient to safeguard Scripture, and whether this insufficiency is not an indication that its formulation fails to do justice to the real doctrine of Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture is larger, more wonderful, than it appears according to the so-called inspiration doctrine. Which theological theory

can do justice to the glory which we note in the development of the Pentateuch, the growth of the Prophetic Books and of the Psalter, the human and yet so miraculously divine development of the writings and of the canon of the New Testament? And is it not significant that our Confessions have not dogmatically fixed a definite theory? Who of the theologians of the sixteenth or seventeenth century was capable of fixing a theological system which answers such problems as the fact that Paul quotes the Septuagint as the word of God even there where it deviates from the Hebrew text? Yes, is there really a doctrine *de sacra Scriptura* unless it is only a segment of the wider doctrine *de verbo Dei*? These are questions which both trends in Lutheranism must answer, questions in which the future obligation of a Scripture-bound Lutheran theology is centered. Only he who confounds the theological school with the Church can make the orthodox form of the doctrine of inspiration a *condicio sine qua non* of church fellowship. It is sufficient to speak where the Confessions have spoken and to remain silent where they are silent.

### VIII

Should a union be effected in the spirit of the Augustana, then a number of practical problems must be solved. What about fellowship between the Free Church and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (VELKD)? This is, of course, excluded as long as the EKID continues to exist as a Church. If it is to be only a federation—and that must be expressed also in its name—then fellowship is possible with those sections of the VELKD in which the Lutheran Confession is taken seriously. Where fellowship between the Free Churches and the State Churches is impossible, a gentlemen's agreement (*Vereinbarung*) must be found, and each party must approach the other with sympathy and a feeling of responsibility. Another practical problem is the training of the theological students. It is self-understood that the Free Churches cannot be expected to send their students to liberal and unionistic faculties. On the other hand, the Free Church must be conscious of the fact that it cannot solve its problems if its clergy is trained to isolate itself from the thought-life of the people, to erect a wall of partition (*Ghettomauer*) from the rest of Christianity, and to ignore completely the tools of theological science. The result of such isolationism is evident in the Free Church literature of the last few decades and especially in the fact that it made no impact at all in the vital questions of the last decade. Church history by-passed the Free Churches. This was the inevitable fate of the Free Churches and at the same time their cross. The Free Church theologians must learn from this fate. Its proposed seminary dare not be a copy of Zehlendorf nor a copy of Breslau. Its faculty must have a long-range view which will permit it to send its students to other universities; however, under very careful pastoral care. It is, of course, presupposed that a new relation among the German Lutherans is in the offing.



We need more confidence in one another, need more understanding of the great mutual problems which exist between the Free Churches, the Provincial Churches, and ecumenical Lutheranism. We need more intercession, more faith in the Lord of the Church, who will not break the bruised reed. We must come out of our individualism and pray God that we may experience more and more the reality of the Church which is confessed with great unanimity in Augustana, Article VII.

### A Homiletical Gem

In 1899 a correspondent asked the late Dr. A. L. Graebner to mention the "oldest systematic treatise on homiletics in Christian literature." In the July number of the third volume of the *Theological Quarterly* the doctor not only informed his correspondent, but all readers of the *Quarterly* that the fourth book of Augustine's work *De Doctrina Christiana* is the oldest Christian treatise on homiletics. The first three books of that work deal with the subject of hermeneutics. On this subject Augustine harbored some fantastic and untenable notions. The very fact that in this part of his work he quotes *in extenso* and discusses the seven rules of Tichonius, according to which the difficult parts of the Holy Scriptures are to be explained, shows that he himself was not perfectly clear on some rules of hermeneutics and in addition was thoroughly in error concerning the rule which is to guide us in differentiating between the figurative and the literal language of Scripture. We admit that even in the first three books of this old Christian classic Augustine teaches and defends many helpful and reliable rules, but, after all, this part of the work is far, far weaker and less trustworthy than the fourth book. Concerning this whole work of Augustine's the venerable Dr. A. L. Graebner wrote at that time: "The first three books, composed A. D. 397, treat of the principles of the interpretation of Scripture and may be considered the first systematic treatise on hermeneutics. The fourth book, which was added nearly thirty years later, A. D. 426, is an exquisite gem, a work which, as far as it goes, has not been surpassed by any textbook of later days, the most recent publications not excepted. It should be remarked, however, that the *genera dicendi* discussed and exemplified by St. Augustine are precisely those which Quintilian exhibits in his *Institutio Oratoria*, and essentially those mentioned in Cicero's *Orator*.\*

The reason for Augustine's excellent work and reliable teaching on the subject of homiletics is not difficult to discover. His entire youth had been devoted to the study of rhetoric and oratory. He had attended the best schools and had devoted himself especially to the study of Cicero's and Quintilian's writings. More than that, he had practiced this art and was highly successful at it. When

\* *Theological Quarterly*, III, 384.

at one time there were competitive orations delivered in Rome in order that a teacher of rhetoric might be selected for Milan in Northern Italy, Augustine was one of the contestants, came forth victorious, and won the appointment. He taught these subjects for years in Carthage, in Rome, and in Milan. True, he warns the reader in the very beginning of this fourth book of *De Doctrina Christiana* that they are not to expect him to present a full course on the subject of oratory such as Cicero had published in *De Oratore* and Quintilian had published in his *Institutio Oratoria*, but he did give as much as a New Testament preacher needs of rhetoric, oratory, and elocution. This patristic gem of Augustine's was read in class by ministerial students almost from the earliest time of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Mo., and was read there again and again during the last two decades. It would be well if all clergymen gave attention not only to what is there said concerning the *tria genera dicendi*, but would actually practice the clear enunciation and proper modulation of the voice which Augustine there recommends. No one is to think that these arts are artificial, theatrical, or unspiritual. St. Paul himself made use of proper modulation of the voice. In his Letter to the Galatians he expresses regret that he cannot be among them and indicate by the modulation and change of his voice his great earnestness and concern for their welfare, Gal. 4:20. He recognized the fact that much of our meaning is expressed by the modulation of the voice.

Certainly, we admit that elocution and rhetoric have at times been practiced by awkward persons who made themselves ridiculous, but here also we must remember: *abusus non tollit usum*. We also admit, and Augustine calls attention to it, that deceivers and selfish schemers have often used these arts in order to mislead the simple, Rom. 16:17. But Augustine then asks the question: Should the defender of the truth enter the combat bare of the advantages which well-arranged matter and clear diction give the speaker, while the teacher of error is a very master of these arts?

It is well to remember that one reason why Augustine is held in such high esteem by Romanists, Lutherans, and Reformed, although each differs with him in some particulars, is the fact that Augustine was a trained rhetorician and made the most skillful use of this art in his writings. True, some parts of his writings belong to the "wood, hay, and stubble" (1 Cor. 3:12), but the fourth book of his *De Doctrina Christiana* is one of the gems which to this day are worthy of being carefully read and studied.

MARTIN S. SOMMER

