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Missouri's Insistence on Acceptance of the Word of God and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as a Condition of Church Fellowship

By W. ARNDT

When Dr. Behnken, President of the Missouri Synod, had delivered his historic address before the convention of the American Lutheran Conference in Rockford, Ill., November 14, various reactions were voiced in non-Missouri circles. The most notable one which we have seen appeared in the *Lutheran Outlook* of December, 1946, and was written by the editor, Dr. E. E. Ryden. We believe it will be helpful if we spend a few minutes over some of the remarks of Dr. Ryden to understand his position and to evaluate it properly.

After stating briefly that the heart of Dr. Behnken's speech was insistence on loyalty to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions, Dr. Ryden continues: "With this staunch Lutheran position no member of the Church of the Reformation will find occasion to quarrel. To every such statement he will rather feel impelled to add his enthusiastic and unqualified Amen!" It is evident that Dr. Ryden does not wish to censure the position which holds that to be a true Lutheran one must be faithful to the Word of God and the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. Why, then, is there not unity among the Lutherans of America? If Dr. Ryden voices the view of members of the American Lutheran Conference, one asks, Why should the American Lutheran Conference find fault with Missouri's position? or, Why does Missouri stand aloof? The following paragraphs of Dr. Ryden's article will have to be read and studied. He continues:

"But that very fact [that is, the unqualified assent of all Lutherans to the main thesis of Dr. Behnken] becomes the real reason for our perplexity. Without fear of contradiction, we may state categorically that there is no Protestant group in America today in which there is such doctrinal agreement as there is among Lutherans. Individual deviations may, of course, be found in every Lutheran general body, but so far as official pronouncements are concerned, there is basic and profound agreement. This has been attested, not only in the

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constitutions of the various groups, but also in historic statements and declarations made by them. Likewise it is revealed in a number of theses and agreements which have been born out of intersynodical doctrinal discussions. From the Washington Declaration and the Minneapolis Theses down through the Pittsburgh Agreement, Brief Statement, Declaration, and Overture for Lutheran Unity there runs a spirit of unfeigned love and loyalty for the revealed Truth of God that ought to inspire a song of thanksgiving in the heart of every Lutheran. In the case of the five constituent bodies of the American Lutheran Conference, we may point to the Minneapolis Theses, the Constitution of the Conference, and the Overture for Lutheran Unity as documents as uncompromising in their fidelity to the Word of God and the historic Lutheran Confessions as are any similar statements by any other Lutheran group in America. Very respectfully we may ask Dr. Behnken, Do these solemn declarations on the part of the American Lutheran Conference and its constituent bodies mean nothing to the Missouri Synod? If not, the question may well be asked, How shall we be able to say *anything* that will have any real significance?" These remarks of Dr. Ryden are spoken in full sincerity, and they have to be carefully weighed.

Let us look at the question why Missouri thus far has been unwilling to declare itself ready to establish fellowship, say, with the American Lutheran Conference? What are the obstacles? Is the hindrance probably pure prejudice, resting on memories of the past when violent controversies were carried on between the bodies in question? Nobody can deny that prejudice often plays a big role in the Church and closes doors that should be kept open. It would not be difficult to cite instances from church history where divisions were caused or continued altogether on account of deep-rooted prejudices which blinded people to conditions as they actually existed. But we do not think that the answer to the question before us is contained in the word "prejudice." While it may be that some members of the Missouri Synod have been and are governed by this evil force in their decisions, for we are all fallible beings, the rank and file, we are convinced, would not let itself be directed and led by this factor. The condition which causes difficulty and keeps the barriers separating the synods intact is the rather patent fact that loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions does not mean the same thing to all members of

the American Lutheran Conference as it does to the members of the Missouri Synod. The expression is used in two senses, the one strict, the other loose and somewhat indefinite. In the Missouri Synod acceptance of the Confessions signifies that the whole doctrinal content of the Confessions is regarded as representing divine truth and as binding; in the American Lutheran Conference there evidently are people for whom the term does not possess this significance and who believe that subscription to the Confessions means a general but not comprehensive approval of the doctrinal positions set forth in our symbolical books.

Can this be substantiated? We think it can. One of the component bodies of the American Lutheran Conference is the Norwegian Free Church. In its official organ, *Folkebladet*, it has delivered one broadside after the other against Missouri, making it very plain that the Norwegian Free Church will not endorse Missouri's doctrinal position. Let its issue of December 2, 1942, be perused. There the editor with utmost directness rejects Missouri's stand on five points: unionism, inspiration, predestination, separation of Church and State, democracy in the Church. In a prior article, written in the summer of 1941 (see March, 1942, issue of C. T. M.), he complains of Missouri's stand, saying: "It is German. The Germans do not seem to understand us inhabitants of the North." There is no doubt about it — subscription to the Lutheran Confessions is regarded differently in the Norwegian Free Church from the way in which it is considered in the Missouri Synod. Let it be noted not only that the editor of *Folkebladet* rejects Missouri's position, but that he is in fellowship with people who, by endorsing the Brief Statement of the Missouri Synod and the Declaration of the American Lutheran Church, have declared that virtually they are in agreement with Missouri on all points of doctrine. That circumstance does not seem to trouble him. The only explanation is that while professing loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions, he gives an interpretation to the term *loyalty* different from that held in the Missouri Synod and is not much worried if others hold to a strict construction of adherence to the Confessions, provided he himself is not expected to share this construction.

The question may be asked whether the Norwegian Free Church (supposing that it shares the views set forth in its

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official paper) is really a sufficiently large factor to be taken into account. Dr. Ryden admits "individual deviations" from the standards and says they are found in all general bodies. He is right to a certain degree. Every church body sooner or later will find in its midst extremists who mistake cultivation of their own pet theories for noble devotion to the cause of the truth. Alas! the Church Militant consists of imperfect members. But, in this instance, recourse to the unavoidable existence of troublemaking, rugged individualists will not satisfy. We are here dealing with a whole church body which, we must assume, joins in the slogan of its official organ, "Keep away from the position of Missouri!" And without much difficulty it could be shown that the Norwegian Free Church is not taking an absolutely isolationistic course in the American Lutheran Conference in thus opposing Missouri's platform. Yes, these people profess loyalty to the Lutheran standards, but it must not be the brand of loyalty which Missouri sponsors.

It will probably be objected that our argumentation involves in a serious degree the frequent error of *petitio principii*, a begging of the question. It may be charged that we, without further ado, assume that Missouri on the five points enumerated by *Folkebladet* is in agreement with the Lutheran Confessions and that the Norwegian Free Church is not — an assumption which ought to be proved correct before it is used in an argument. We, of course, grant at once that our mere assertion that Missouri in the points mentioned adheres to the Confessions does not constitute evidence. Unfortunately time and space are lacking for a detailed discussion of the question who in these issues is in agreement with the Confessions, the Norwegian Free Church or Missouri? But we think that with respect to one of them, the doctrine of predestination, the Norwegian Free Church theologians would not be loath themselves to admit without much debate that Missouri stands on the Confessions. The Norwegian Free Church has never been noted for insistence on a loyal acceptance of what the Confessions say on the doctrine of predestination, while this very thing has been a characteristic of Missouri. In general, we believe we are not traducing or slandering when we say that the Norwegian Free Church has always sponsored a more liberal view of subscription to the Confessions than that contended for in the Missouri Synod. That there is a clash here, and that in

this clash Missouri represents a strict view of confessional loyalty while the Norwegian Free Church represents a more liberal one, is in our opinion undeniable.

Some critic may here interrupt us to remark that Missouri had better prove that its view of loyalty to the Lutheran standards is the only right one. Is Missouri's voice the voice of God? Who has made it the arbiter in the disputes that arise in the Lutheran Church in America? That remark is justified. If Missouri says that loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions means acceptance of the whole doctrinal content of the Confessions, that has to be proved to be the right view. The demonstration, we hold, is not difficult to furnish. We conservative Lutherans have examined the doctrines of the Lutheran Confessions, and we have found them to be the teachings of the divine Word. We accept them, not because they are in the Confessions, but because the Confessions in their teachings agree with the Scriptures. How could we take any other than a strict view of the significance of subscription to the Confessions? Being loyal to them simply means loyalty to the divine Word. If anybody refuses to join us in thus accepting the confessional writings, we fear that his refusal is not based on objection to what the Confessions say, but to what the Scriptures say. It is the majesty of the divine Word which looms large before us and dominates our thinking. Where God has spoken, must we not hasten to yield our assent? The Confessions, that is our conviction, merely reiterate for us in convenient and at the same time heartwarming, thrilling form what the Scriptures teach.

The student of developments in the Lutheran Church will, we think, say that what we are dealing with here reminds him of the old question whether the Confessions should be signed *quia* or *quatenus*, that is, whether they should be accepted because they agree with the Word of God or *in so far as* they exhibit such agreement. The question was debated with much learning and fervor in the third quarter of the last century, and the outcome favored the *quia* subscription, because it was recognized that a *quatenus* subscription was next to meaningless and could without violation of conscience be given by us to the works of Plato and the Koran of the Mohammedans. We all believed that this *quatenus* subscription had been sent to the lethal chamber and would not be heard of again; nor

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do we mean to say that the editor of *Folkebladet* and his sympathizers are trying to resurrect it. But, after all, closely scrutinized, the position he is striving for bears a certain family likeness to the discarded view, because it in reality opposes a strict interpretation of what subscription to the Lutheran Confessions implies. Why talk so much, says the editor of *Folkebladet*, about unity in doctrine? What we should be concerned with is co-operation. (For the exact words cf. the March, 1942, issue of C. T. M.) In our view this brings out the point which we have been endeavoring to make — that loyalty to the Lutheran standards is a term which is not used in the same sense by some members of the American Lutheran Conference as by members of the Missouri Synod.

It will be held by some that this insistence on a strict view of acceptance of the Confessions is bound to lead to a cold intellectualism, a paper orthodoxy, a lifeless conformity which will do the Church no good and cause untold harm to many individuals who are either present or prospective Christians. In reply we admit that there is some danger that orthodoxy remains in the head and does not descend to the heart, that it graces the printed page, but not the life of those who profess it. Dead orthodoxy is an evil and, sad to say, not merely a phantom one. But *abusus non tollit usum*. The wrong use made of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith does not prove that the doctrine itself is wrong. Similarly, the striving for exact conformity with Scripture teaching as set forth in the Lutheran Confessions is not proved a deplorable aberration by the objectionable use made of it by certain people. That such fervor for the unadulterated character of religious teaching does not necessarily involve a coldness of heart and indifference toward a life of devoted service of the heavenly Master is shown well by the case of the Apostle Paul. Notice his insistence on adherence to divine truth: "Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (*ibid.*, 5:9). But it is this very Apostle who speaks the words of most tender gratitude and utter dedication to the service of the Savior, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh I live

by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me," (*ibid.*, 2:20). The fidelity to the truth which we sponsor, it must be remembered, is not a slavish, servile one, but it consists in joyous acceptance of what God has taught, with which is connected the ardent resolve gratefully to walk in the steps of the divine Redeemer and to do good to all men.

There is another paragraph of Dr. Ryden's article which should be briefly considered. "The crux of the whole problem seems to lie in this, *When* have we reached doctrinal unity? If the strivings of the various Lutheran bodies along this line during the last decades have failed to achieve the desired goal, it would appear that further doctrinal discussions are futile. Those who have pursued this course in recent years have eventually made the discovery that it leads nowhere. No sooner has agreement been reached on one point than another issue is raised, a process which may be continued *ad infinitum*." Dr. Ryden here refers to the method that has been followed in recent years to establish unity or to ascertain whether unity of faith existed between the negotiating church bodies. A calm appraisal of what has taken place will, we believe, show that the method employed was one which quite naturally suggested itself. Missouri in its Brief Statement told the world where it stood. The American Lutheran Church, in its Declaration, stated what its doctrinal positions are. The two documents were united in the Doctrinal Affirmation. There has been much criticism of the latter document. Evidently drawing up a joint doctrinal statement for several church bodies is not an easy thing. Whether this method should be followed in the future is a question which Christian wisdom has to decide; divine revelation has not spoken on that point. The *method* is not a matter of major concern. The great question is whether, before there can be union, the various Lutheran bodies must not only pledge loyalty to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions, but must likewise mean the same thing when they make this pledge. In all humility we suggest that all those interested in the well-being of our Lutheran Zion for once should approach the subject of church union from this point of view.

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