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Memorandum Concerning the Church Situation in Germany

By MARTIN KIUNKE

II

THE UNITED EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN GERMANY (VELKD)¹

The VELKD hopes to become the long-desired *corpus Lutheranorum*. Rudolph Rocholl (superintendent in Goettingen, *Kirchenrat* in Breslau, and president of the Prussian Lutheran Free Church) saw the disastrous influence of unionism more clearly than others and shortly after 1900 appealed to the Lutheran provincial churches to form a *corpus Lutheranorum* on a clearly defined confessional basis. His appeal was left unheeded. After the revolution of 1918, the day for the union of the Lutheran Churches seemed to have come, for with the deposition of the German princes and the radical changes in the provincial church governments the whole structure of the Church could have taken a new form, especially since the Weimar republic favored the separation of Church and State. However, the Lutheran provincial churches had been so weakened through the liberalism of the preceding decades, that they failed to see the necessity of organizing a confessionally bound *corpus Lutheranorum* and lacked completely the will and power to effect such a union. In the subsequent years the Barthian theology arose as a lodestar on the ecclesiastical horizon. The theological youth, also within the Lutheran Churches, followed the dialecticians. At the same time the influence of the Prussian Union became stronger. Was this not the hour to establish a *corpus Lu-*

¹ It is proposed to unite all the nominally Lutheran provincial churches of Germany, such as the Bavarian, Hannoverian, Saxon, Mecklenburg-Schwerin, Luebeck, Braunschweig, Schaumburg-Lippe, Hamburg, and others, under the name of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (VELKD). A tentative constitution has been drafted and has been submitted to the various provincial churches for ratification. The Church of Wuertemberg has refused to join the union of Lutheran churches, stating that this union would be detrimental to the larger unity of the EKID. Dr. Hans Iwand of Goettingen lists twenty-eight reasons why he is opposed to the formation of the VELKD. See *Evangelische Theologie*, Heft 8, Jahrgang 1946, p. 285. In the first installment we presented Dr. Kiunke's evaluation of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKID).—F. E. M.

theranorum? However, the majority of the pastors and congregations within the Lutheran provincial churches were too weary to wage a confessional struggle. Unionism had become their second nature theologically. For example, there was practically no reaction when a leading theologian at the observance of the 400th anniversary of the Augustana held in Augsburg (within a Lutheran provincial church!) read the Augustana and omitted all the *damnamus secus docentes* clauses. Three years later—in 1933—as a bolt out of the clear sky the Lutheran Church was confronted with the “church struggle.” Totally unprepared in its fight with Nazism, the *corpus Lutheranorum* was now to be created. But too late! The church struggle initiated by the German Christians had played such havoc in the Lutheran provincial churches that a union on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions was impossible. The Barmen Theses of Karl Barth were considered adequate for a union of Lutherans and Reformed and Evangelicals in their joint confession against the heresies which had come into the Church. But in this joint struggle against the iniquitous powers of the state there also became manifest here and there a strong Lutheran consciousness, and the hope was expressed that at last the *corpus Lutheranorum* could be realized. Immediately after the collapse in 1945 sincere men set to work, and by 1947 a constitution for this new church body had been prepared, and as soon as the various Lutheran provincial churches will have approved the new constitution, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (VELKD) will be a reality.

The confessional groups within the Lutheran State Churches as well as within a number of the Lutheran Free Churches have watched this development with deepest interest. Many rejoiced in the hope that this new church organization would gain the victory over the Calvinistically oriented and unionistically inclined powers, and that it would eventually undermine the union program of the EKID established at Treysa.

But what has happened in reality? The constitution of the VELKD is a bitter disappointment for conservative and confessional Lutherans. They do not doubt that the leaders of the VELKD had the highest ideals of confessional Lutheranism in view. But it is apparent that the proposed con-

stitution will achieve the very opposite, especially in three points.

1. *According to its constitution, the Lutheran provincial churches sacrifice their independence.* This is evident from Article 5, Section 8, in which the VELKD enters into a relation with the Reformed and Evangelical Churches, whereby a fellowship of churches in the spirit of Treysa 1945 and 1947 is recognized.² There is to be a co-operation not only *in externis*, but also *in internis*, including the most essential work of the Church: a joint confession of the Gospel. Where such a fellowship of Protestant communions is established, there the Lutheran Church has sacrificed its independent confessional position and has gone into the camp of unionists. It can now no longer act independently in the most important function of the Church, that is, its confessing.

2. A forfeiture of this exclusive ecclesiastical position involves, furthermore, *a departure from the confession of the fathers.* The confessional paragraph of the VELKD reads: "The basis of the VELKD is the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is given in the Old and the New Testaments and testified to in the Augsburg Confession and the remaining Lutheran Confessions." In the light of present conditions this paragraph is vague. Is the Formula of Concord included? This question is in place, because some Lutheran provincial churches have not accepted all the Lutheran Confessions. Furthermore, and this is important, there has been no truly genuine Lutheran Church which has not accepted the *Augustana Invariata*. The VELKD, however, begins its history by actually ignoring this basic confession of the Lutheran Church. Under the present conditions it is necessary to specify the *Invariata*. But this word has not been omitted inadvertently, for it was eliminated only after a bitter struggle. Not a few members of the VELKD demanded the *Invariata*, and the first draft of the constitution included the word. But why was it not retained? Because men were no longer free in their ecclesiastical actions, and because the power of the unionistic elements was becoming manifest. The *Variata*, though not specifically mentioned, is the doctrinal basis. It is significant that Hans Asmussen, the chancellor of the EKID, stated in the official

² Cp. previous article in November issue.

publication in the beginning of 1947: "I do not believe that I am doing an injustice to the VELKD when I assume that it is ready to recognize churches which accept the *Variata Augustana*." One asks: Have the men not considered what an important role the *Variata* has played in German Protestantism since the Reformation? Have they not considered that Calvin was able to sign the *Augustana Variata*? Yes, that he even fought for it, though he did not love it? Have they not considered that the Reformed Elector John Sigismund in 1614 demanded of the Lutheran pastors to subscribe to the *Variata*, so that he might eliminate the specifically Lutheran, "the papistic superstition," from his country? Have they forgotten that by pledging the candidates only upon the Scriptures, the Ecumenical Creeds, and the *Variata* he hoped gradually to train an entirely new ministry?

But more significant is the fact that by eliminating the *Invariata* the Formula of Concord has also been rejected. That is inevitable, for the Formula of Concord "is the thorough, correct, and final repetition of the first Unaltered Augsburg Confession." It is an established fact that the Formula of Concord, prepared by true Scripture theologians over a period of years, is of incisive importance in the history of the Lutheran Church. It draws a clear line of demarcation between the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches. It erects a wall of protection against all unionistic and syncretistic tendencies. No wonder that in 1578 all who believed that the only unifying power in a divided Lutheran Church was the pure doctrine, greeted the Formula of Concord with joy. If the VELKD is willing to surrender the *Invariata* and necessarily also the Formula of Concord, then it actually sacrifices the best confessional heritage of the fathers and at the same time declares as an error those decisions of the fathers to which they pledged unswerving adherence, fully conscious of the fact that they would have to give an account of their action on Judgment Day. Acceptance of the *Variata* in reality separates the VELKD from the historic Lutheran Church; she then no longer participates in the *consensus* of true doctrine which at one time filled Lutheran congregations and pastors with deep gratitude. It establishes the *dissensus* as a legally sanctioned condition. Naturally, by accepting the *Variata*, the VELKD explicitly — at least implicitly — grants

the same right to the divergent doctrines of the Reformed Confessions as to those of the Lutheran Confessions. There is no longer the tension between truth and error; there is only the fiction that the one truth has two differing aspects, or, as a leader of the EKID formulated it: "The Christian concept of truth recognizes only the one truth in the mysterious tension of the differing doctrinal confessions." A church which subscribes to this principle is no confessing church in the spirit of a Luther. Such a church has in reality made a pact with unionism and syncretism. A United Lutheran Church based on the *Variata* ceases to be a Church in the sense of Augustana VII.

This is true even though the constitution will commit the VELKD to a number of excellent projects, such as maintaining Lutheran doctrine and practice; the training of a confessionally sound and qualified ministry; advising its member churches in liturgical and congregational problems. But all these noble purposes are vitiated by the false confessional basis of this *corpus Lutheranorum*. The most important acts of the Church are now motivated by interest not only in pure doctrine, but also in false doctrine. This is typically the spirit of the *Variata*, which grants to truth and error the same right. There is a tremendous difference between the casual intrusion of error under strong protest and the *a priori* admission of error with the implicit rejection of doctrinal discipline. The latter situation is the characteristic of *ecclesia corrupta*, where it is humanly impossible to remedy false doctrine.

3. *In the new constitution the Lutherans have sanctioned the un-Lutheran practice of altar and pulpit fellowship with heterodox churches.* The traditionally exclusive position of the Lutheran Church must become evident not only in its basic confession, but also in its church practice, more specifically, in the question of pulpit and altar fellowship. What does the new constitution say on this point? Nothing. True, the constitution states that full pulpit and altar fellowship exists among the member churches of the VELKD. But for all practical purposes this was in effect for a long time. As to the relation on this point with the other members of the EKID, Reformed and Evangelical Churches, no word is said. And this silence is ominous. All the more so, since altar and pulpit fellowship with non-Lutherans has been practiced for a long

time. Due to the mass movement of displaced persons this practice has become quite general. All are agreed that the solution of this problem is difficult. But dare the Church of the pure Gospel compromise the truth in the interest of solving a temporary problem? For, is not the union at the altar, according to Loehe, the union above all unions? We realize that the present problems are tremendous, but dare a Lutheran Church, if it takes its Confessions seriously, officially keep silent on this important question, especially since the Lutheran Church has established "fellowship" with Reformed and Evangelicals in the EKID? Here is the *status confessionis*. Silence on this point is a denial.

The declaration: "Within the VELKD there is a complete pulpit and altar fellowship," has been understood by some to exclude the Reformed and Evangelicals from this fellowship. However, according to an official interpretation the constitution does not forbid altar and pulpit fellowship with Reformed members, though it does not sanction its *legal* status. In short, the VELKD is ready to side-step the issues where a clear-cut statement is absolutely necessary. Languor in this important point will lead slowly but surely to the dissolution of genuine Lutheranism.³ Whether we like it or not, the fact remains that our doctrine of the Lord's Supper is a focal point, where our doctrinal statements converge.⁴ And the silence of the *corpus Lutheranorum* on this point is the calamitous silence of the "later Melanchthon." But will not the silence in 1947 bring even greater disaster upon the Church than the silence of 400 years ago? Then thousands of pastors rallied around Westphal of Hamburg, Moerlin and Chemnitz of Brunswick, Brenz of Wuerttemberg, Heshusius of the Palatinate, to stop the unionistic maneuvers of the Calvinists. But today there is little evidence of such Lutheran consciousness. And the silence of the VELKD will of necessity only aggravate this situation.

³ This judgment of the author does not seem too harsh in view of the resolutions adopted by the leaders of EKID, including also Lutheran churchmen, at Treysa II in June of this year. These resolutions are reprinted in the November issue of C. T. M., p. 785. — F. E. M.

⁴ This must be correctly understood. A denial, for example, of the Real Presence is a denial of the *genus maiestaticum*, and that is a denial of the all-sufficiency of Christ's vicarious death. Following the lead of the Halle Resolutions of 1937, the members of the EKID wish to eliminate the differences between the Lutheran and the Reformed views on the Lord's Supper. See C. T. M., July, 1947, p. 534. — F. E. M.

We say this with the deepest emotion. At the same time we ask how such a condition came about. This question disturbs especially those who had the highest hopes for the emerging *corpus Lutheranorum*. However, in the light of church history, one could hardly expect any other development. What a variety of heterogeneous elements have been absorbed by the Lutheran Church during the nineteenth century! There is first the poison of enlightenment and rationalism; then the empirical theology of Schleiermacher (*Erlebnistheologie*), which completely distorted the concept of truth and the concept of the Church; then came the disrupting theological liberalism; finally, Neo-Calvinism, not to mention the wild aberrations of the *Deutsche Christen*. One asks: How much of the one or the other of these heresies has been absorbed by Lutheran clergymen? How many pastors have really understood the confession of their own communion and are able to use it as *norma normata* for their sermons, the cure of souls, and church practice? Naturally, the congregations reflect the position of their pastors. There are indeed areas — and by no means small — where personal piety is still very evident. But it is difficult to inculcate a deep understanding of the way of salvation as long as the present “mass-congregations” with an undermanned clergy are continued.

How is it possible under such conditions to establish a *corpus Lutheranorum* in the spirit of the *Invariata* and the Formula of Concord? a *corpus Lutheranorum* which will valiantly oppose Calvinism and other non-Lutheran trends coming from the ecumenical movement? True, after the First World War there was a gradual renaissance of Lutheranism, which after the Second World War widened its influence considerably. We are deeply grateful for this movement, but it has not gripped the congregations as did the revival of the nineteenth century. This new trend in Lutheranism is today only a streamlet without a well-defined river bed, and its potential influence has not been recognized. This is probably the reason why the Lutheran leaders have incorporated the *corpus Lutheranorum* into the EKID in spite of warnings against such a procedure. The church council of the Breslau Free Church, for example, addressed a letter to the bishops of Bavaria, Hannover, and Mecklenburg as follows: “The

powers within and without Germany which have the determined will to Calvinize our country insofar as it is not Roman, are extremely powerful. We need not explain this here in greater detail. It is impossible to resist these powers successfully unless confessionally conscious Lutherans refuse to enter into a false and God-displeasing church union. We can appreciate how loath you are to disrupt the unity of the EKID, in which practically all the vitally active elements of German Protestantism are united, and we can understand your desire to liberate the Lutheran Church from the fatal danger of unionism by working toward a reorganization of the EKID as a federation. However, as the church developments since Treysa have clearly shown, we are convinced that this attempt will be a failure. Only one way remains open, namely, the separation from the EKID. Whether or not the Lutheran provincial churches will take this way is not in our domain."

They have not gone this way, which in view of the strong tendencies within the EKID and the deplorable situations in the Lutheran Church was the only way to establish a *corpus Lutheranorum*. The call of the hour was: Unite all those who desire a Lutheranism in the sense of the *Invariata* and the Formula of Concord, both within the Lutheran Churches and the Union Churches, as a true *corpus Lutheranorum*. Of course, this way would have been an extremely difficult one and would have led to much hostility and grief. But is there another way if the Lutheran Church of the pure doctrine and confessional loyalty is to continue? The way is through the Lutheran Free Churches.

III

THE LUTHERAN FREE CHURCHES⁵

1. Until fifteen years ago every free church, i. e., any church organized outside the state-approved Church, was stigmatized as a sect. The church struggle despoiled the State churches of their former prerogatives, and the stigma of sect no longer attaches to "free churches."

2. The Scriptural principle of separation of Church and State has been proved to be practical in the life of the free

⁵ This is only a synopsis of the author's development of his point.
F. E. M.

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churches, to mention only one area: Doctrinal discipline of theological professors and pastors can be and is exercised.

3. Since the Free Church movement is the only way in which a genuine *corpus Lutheranorum* can be established, three projects confront the presently existing Lutheran Free Churches:

a. To unite on a God-pleasing basis all Lutheran Free Churches in Germany;

b. To strengthen the loyal Lutherans of Germany by uniting with those Lutherans of the world who accept the *Invariata* and the Formula of Concord. Such a World Lutheran Conference, U. A. C., would counteract the unionism of a *Variata* Lutheranism, for the distinctive mark would be a union on purity of doctrine. Such a World Lutheran Conference, U. A. C., would also be the one effective antidote to Neo-Calvinism;

c. To establish a first-class theological seminary in which the Lutheranism of the *Invariata* will be inculcated into the future pastors, where proper mission methods would be taught, and from which sound Lutheran theological literature would be disseminated.

The Lutheran Free Churches are conscious in deep humility of the tremendous responsibilities, and they look to America for help. But, above all, they trust in the Lord, the Head of His Church.

