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Is Doctrinal Unity a Luxury?

By TH. ENGELDER

(Conclusion)

By the grace of God we have been won for the proposition that the adherence to all doctrine revealed is not a luxury, but a necessity. And by the grace of God we repel, in the first place, all the arguments to the contrary. The argument is advanced that we Lutherans distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental articles and thus *eo ipso* declare the non-fundamental articles to be unnecessary. Nothing could be further from the truth. To be sure, there is a great distinction between the fundamental articles and the non-fundamental ones. We say that the fundamental articles are necessary for salvation, while faith may subsist with the denial of the non-fundamental articles. But when the question is whether one is at liberty to reject the non-fundamental articles, the only Scriptural answer is that even the most trivial article must be accepted. The importance of the various articles varies, but that certainly gives no man the right to say that the least important ones are not important. Every single article that is revealed in Scripture is very important — for the preservation of the old faith and for providing a strong, robust, energetic Christianity. "Nothing taught in the Bible may be treated as an 'open question'; Christians should insist upon the unity of the Spirit; persistent denial of any doctrine stands in the way of church fellowship; it is unionism to legitimize, for instance, the preaching of Chiliasm side by side with that of Antichiliasm." (*Concordia Cyclopaedia*, p. 510.) "None of the fathers, least of all Dr. Walther, ever declared non-fundamental doctrines non-essential" (*Towards Lutheran Union*, p. 57).

Why, even though a man may be saved despite the fact that he denies, by reason of his ignorance or his inability to see its connection with the chief fundamental doctrines, an *articulus fundamentalis secundarius* (which the unionists therefore call a non-fundamental, secondary point), does this prove that that article is not important? God forgives the Christians in the Reformed Church their error regarding the Lord's Supper; is it therefore an unimportant teaching? Does God

license that teaching? Dr. Pieper states in *Distinctive Doctrines*, p. 127: "It is not according to the *good pleasure* of God — as modern theologians teach — that sects exist, for all Christians are required to agree on all doctrines of faith revealed in Holy Scripture (1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:3-6), but sects arose and exist by God's *forbearance* only, like other sins. Sects arise and continue not for the purpose that Christians should join them, but for the purpose that Christians should prove their allegiance to God by avoiding them, 1 Cor. 11:19." Would God reveal doctrines and at the same time declare them to be unimportant?

We shall keep on saying with Luther: "One little point of doctrine is of more value than heaven and earth; and therefore we cannot permit the least jot thereof to be corrupted" (IX: 650). "We are bound to keep all the articles of the Christian doctrine, great ones and small ones (we do not, in fact, *consider any of them small*), *pure and certain*" (IX: 649).

The unionists argue, furthermore, *that the times have changed*; under present conditions the demand for doctrinal agreement is out of place. Bishop McConnell told the Church Federation in St. Louis: "The voices of our time call for Christian unity. This does not mean uniformity. . . . Our world does not tolerate old differences. . . . Our differences remind me of the great beasts one used to see pictured in our physical geographies as the inhabitants of the earth during the prehistoric periods. I used to ask myself who killed these strange, forgotten monsters. The answer was 'nobody.' 'The climate changed, and they just died off.' The climate of life. Our differences are going to die off." (*The Church at Work*, Dec. 5, 1929.) *The Christian Century* of Feb. 10, 1937: "The motto of the Disciples of Christ, 'Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where they are silent, we are silent,' cannot be recognized as binding. . . . Has the accumulated experience of the centuries no authority? Has Christian tradition no weight? Did God cease to speak to men when the New Testament canon was closed? . . . 'In the New Testament,' says Prof. Wilhelm Hermann, 'there is no unalterable doctrine which embraces the whole scheme of Christian thought. It is no imperfection, it is rather an excellence, that the epistles of the New Testament are messages for definite circumstances

and not contributions to a doctrinal system which shall be valid to all eternity.' This, if it is true, is important, and the Lutherans should be paged and told about it." That will suit those who live in the climate of utter indifference to the Bible. But we Lutherans need not be told about it. We are immune against that argument. The conditions in the world have not changed. The same need is here. What was true one hundred years ago, four hundred years ago ("filial submission to every word of God's revelation was the life stream in Luther's theology," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, 1947, p. 811), nineteen hundred years ago ("teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you"), is true today. Not one single doctrine may be set aside as a luxury; the Church needs them all.

Nor shall we fall for the "*irreducible minimum*," the "*least common denominator*" propaganda of the unionists. Dr. S. P. Cadman would be glad to see a holiday given to all theological speculation for fifty years. "I plead for union upon an irreducible minimum of faith and propose certain neutral zones for difference of opinion in theological thought. . . . There is a waste of the resources of God to satisfy sectarian vanity." (See *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July, 1934.) The irreducible minimum would be some such phrase as "belief in the Lord Jesus our Savior." In asking for this irreducible minimum Cadman and his unionistic brethren are setting the demands of their human philosophy in place of the demands of Scripture. A Bible theologian will not hear of such a demand. He declares "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). He considers it a sacrilege to "reduce" the Christian doctrine in any way. "Have God's representatives on earth the option to offer a discount on the terms set by God, in order to meet a given situation?" (Schmauk and Benze, in *The Confessional Principle*, p. XVIII.) Luther: "The doctrine is not ours but God's" (IX:644). Cadman and his unionistic brethren ask the Church to discard a great number of the Christian doctrines as "luxuries," unneeded by the Church; but, as Professor B. B. Warfield pointed out, the "reduction of Christianity to its lowest common denominator means nothing less than the shearing of Christianity of all its strength" (see *Lehre u. Wehre*, 1917, p. 282). Every single doctrine belongs to the health-giving food which the Lord has provided for

His Church. The diet prescribed by Cadman and his unionistic brethren is a starvation diet. Discussing the "irreducible minimum" of the human body, a physician told of men who had both arms and legs amputated and still lived. Others lived after removal of the gall bladder, after the nose and eyes were gone, after parts of the brain were cut away. Try this, said the doctor, on *one* individual, but before the irreducible minimum is reached, the patient will be dead. And, says the *Presbyterian*, "according to our liberal brethren men seem to be able to live without the inerrancy of Scripture; therefore lop it off. . . . And the Blood Atonement—many modern folk subsist comfortably enough without that outworn, childish dogma; therefore lop it off. Of course, long before the 'irreducible minimum' is reached, the patient will be dead." (See the *Lutheran Church Herald*, Nov. 29, 1927.) F. Bente said, and all Bible theologians agree with him: "In our negotiations looking to church unity we must keep in mind the objectives which the Word of God has set down. Scripture asks us to aim at one thing: agreement in all articles of doctrine, nothing more, but also nothing less. In seeking church unity our minimal demand, as well as our maximal demand, is that all subject themselves to God's clear Word in every point." (*Lehre u. Wehre*, 1897, p. 208.)

In working towards the union, the unity, of the churches, we must realize, in the second place, that God's Word effects the unity. "The Word," says Luther, "must establish Christian unity and communion" (IX:831). "The Holy Ghost produces harmony in the house . . . by teaching the Christians to believe the same thing" (XIX:345). Christian unity is not a luxury provided only for a select group, but God has placed it in the reach of all. All that is necessary is for all to yield willing assent to Scripture. And all doctrines of Christianity are set down in Scripture in the clearest language. Unionism denies not only that agreement in doctrine is required by God, but also that it is possible to achieve such agreement. "Is perfect agreement concerning doctrine possible?" asks Dr. Pieper, and he answers "most emphatically that it is. The Scriptures are perfectly clear on all articles of faith, every article of faith being revealed at least somewhere in Scripture in plain and proper words. God, by graciously giving His Word to men, did not propose to them

a collection of riddles, but made His Word to be 'a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path' (Ps. 119:105), 'a light that shineth in a dark place' (2 Pet. 1:19), 'making wise the simple' (Ps. 19:7). Erring concerning any article of faith is impossible as long as the words of Scripture are retained as they read. Ere falling into error is possible, the plain words of Scripture must have been entirely set aside or twisted from their natural meaning according to human reason or feeling." (*Distinctive Doctrines*, p. 138.) Again: "It seems incredible that the possibility of reaching an agreement on all articles of the Christian faith should be quite generally denied today within Christendom. It is not a matter of agreeing on dark sayings of men and abstruse philosophical problems, but of agreeing on what God meant when He clearly revealed the doctrine in Holy Scripture. The Christian doctrine is revealed in Scripture in such a manner that it does not require great human skill and art, but only the simple faith in God's Word to know the truth. Scripture does not merely hint at the doctrines, does not contain them in a rudimentary form, waiting for the theologian to develop them. God certainly did not in writing Holy Scripture say only the A, leaving it to the wisdom of men to find the B and the C and the rest of the alphabet of the doctrine by their own endeavors. No, all articles of the Christian doctrine are fully and completely revealed in God's Word. All that men need to do in order to possess the truth is to simply repeat in faith what God has already said. And Holy Scripture is clear to all Christians, the unlearned as well as the learned. . . . Ps. 19:7; 2 Pet. 1:19; 2 Tim. 3:15." (*Lehre u. Wehre*, 1888, p. 291.)

There is disagreement in doctrine within external Christendom. But to what do these various sects owe their origin? We are being told that God is responsible for this; He has endowed people with various temperaments, so that, following their natural inclinations, there is a Lutheran *type* of doctrine, a Reformed *type*, a Roman Catholic *type* — each type pleasing to God. No, a sect arises when men refuse to accept the simple teaching of Scripture. Pieper: "The Reformed Church cannot be called a sister church of the Lutheran Church. That a Reformed Church exists side by side with the Lutheran Church is not the result of 'a necessary historical

development,' as men say nowadays, but is due to the fact that the Reformed Church has, in those doctrines in which she differs from the Lutheran Church, made human reason the principle of theology alongside of God's Word." (*Vor-traege ueber "die Ev.-Lutherische Kirche,"* p. 29.) R. Lenski: "Everyone and all of us together can truly find only this one truth and true sense in the Scriptures, and will thus be one in faith. And the Scriptures are clear, perfectly adequate to present this one truth to every man. They who deviate from that one truth, no matter how, can do so only by making the Word mean what it never meant, and *they*, they alone, are to blame for such deviation." (On Acts 17:11.) Luther: "All heresies and errors in the Scriptures have not arisen from the simplicity of the words as is the general report throughout the world, but from men not attending to the simplicity of the words" (*Dass der freie Wille nichts sei*, XVIII: 1820).

"It is neither necessary *nor* possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines"—there is no justification for such a statement.* "God has given Holy Scripture such a form that the knowledge of the truth is not only possible, but that straying from the truth is impossible as long as we continue

* It may be apropos to cite a few sentences of Huelsemann, quoted by Walther in *Lehre und Wehre*, 1868, page 144: "In dogmas which do not injure the means for attaining salvation, all and every believer may err. . . . Toleration in non-fundamental errors and in matters of ignorance pertains to the union of brotherly love among those who without division are associated in a visible church." Walther's comment is: "Huelsemann teaches nothing else but what we with all orthodox teachers assert, that an error is only then church divisive if it either destroys the dogmatic foundation or at least attacks the organic foundation, as when one stubbornly and consciously contradicts the clear Word of God even after convinced by argument." Hoenecke has this in his *Dogmatik*: "That the Church has never reached a perfect, but only a fundamental unity of doctrine and confession, is a fact which is true, but at the same time one which should deeply grieve the Christians and cause them to be ashamed, for this defect has its reason nowhere else but in the flesh of the Christians. Yet the fact of the defect cannot involve its right to exist, and from the deplorable fact that the Church has ever reached only a fundamental unity of faith we are not to draw the conclusion and principle that she is not to go beyond this condition. We shall indeed bear with those who err from weakness; but their error is not to demand recognition as a justified point of view, as an open question, but it is to be regarded only as a position which offends against Scripture and which will annul church fellowship, not indeed at once, but certainly at such a time when the error, after a thorough refutation from Scripture and after its inability to submit any points for its justification has become manifest, still insists upon maintaining itself." (*Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik*, I:457.)

in the words of Scripture, as Christ so clearly testifies when He guarantees to us in John 8 the knowledge of the truth if we continue in His Word." (Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, I, p. 180.)

But can all men think alike? The unionists like to harp on the theme that it "was not the divine purpose that those who love the Lord Jesus should think alike on all points of doctrine" (John De Witt). They do not think alike in philosophy; why should they be made to think alike in theology? "There is no possibility of educated and conscientious men agreeing in any one philosophy or theology" (C. Macfarland). Now, there are certain spheres of knowledge where all men do think alike. Dr. James Endicott of Canada said at a Lenten noonday service in St. Louis: "The Savior was talking of the way of life, which is as definite as mathematics. . . . The mathematical man keeps saying to us, 'twice two is four.' He will not budge from that by a hair's breadth, yet by that narrow rule he measures the stars. Christianity is a way of truth and will have no sort of compromise with lies of any sort." (*Globe-Democrat*, March 24, 1932.) And while it is true that there is no possibility of men agreeing in any one philosophy, it is not true that this applies equally to theology. In philosophy there is no infallible teacher. But the Christian theologian follows the infallible teaching of Scripture. And if all Christian theologians did follow Scripture, there would be unanimity of teaching within the Christian Church. As Pieper said in his *Vortraege* (II, p. 65): "If men would permit Scripture to explain itself, there would be no dissensus but a perfect consensus." There is a consensus of doctrine in the confessional Lutheran Church. If men took their thoughts from Scripture, all Christians would think alike on all points of doctrine.

And "the Word establishes Christian unity and communion" by teaching as the chief and central article of the Christian religion the justification of the sinner by grace through faith. Concord between the Lutheran and the Catholic Churches cannot be established by making the disagreement on the *articulus fundamentalissimus* a minor matter, but by showing that the doctrine of justification by works takes the heart out of Christianity. "Upon this article all things depend which we teach and practice in opposition to the

Pope." (*Smalcald Art., Trigl.*, p. 463.) When a Catholic priest or a Catholic layman is won over to confess justification by faith alone, the work of the reunion of Christendom is being accomplished. And we need to stress this article of justification by faith alone also in our negotiations with the Reformed churches. For "while most Protestant churches subscribe with the Lutheran Church to the truth that justification is by grace alone, by faith, without the deeds of the Law, they subvert this doctrine through their teaching concerning the *means* by which a man is justified. They teach falsely concerning the means by which God justifies, the Word and the Sacraments, and concerning the means by which man appropriates it, faith; and these errors are buttressed by false teaching concerning the work and person of Christ and concerning His gracious will and call of God." (Walther, *Referat von der Rechtfertigung*, p. 35.) And C. P. Krauth said: "Our Church is needed not only for her motherhood to her own children but for the great wants of Christendom and of the world. She is needed as a witness to that doctrine which is conceded in terms by the whole Protestant world, but which is invaded primarily or by necessary inference by every system which is at war with ours — the doctrine of justification by faith." (*The Lutheran Diet*, 1877, p. 48.) A godly union with the Reformed churches can be effected only through a thorough discussion of the article of justification and its subsidiary articles. Walther: "Our polemics against doctrinal errors will only then be of practical importance when we show that these errors directly affect the doctrine of justification."

Moreover, "*amisso articulo justificationis, amissa est simul tota doctrina Christiana*" (Luther, on Galatians, IX:24). The doctrine of justification affects every other doctrine. Pieper: "To be sure, a Christian may for a time err in those articles which lie on the *periphery*. But a Christian who from weakness errs on certain points at once renounces his errors when God's Word is made to *comfort* him." (*Vortraege*, I, p. 32.) In other words, he will drop his error if he is shown that it militates against the comforting doctrine of justification by grace alone. Is the Christian enmeshed by the error of Sabatarianism? Show him that it subverts the Christian liberty, the result of justification by faith. Can he not see the Pope is the Antichrist? Speaking of the false claim of the Papacy

to have supreme authority over the faith of men and the false claim to the power to forgive sin, Hodge says: "Those claims have no parallel in the history of the world. If such pretensions as these do not constitute the power which makes them Antichrist, then nothing more remains. Any future Antichrist that may arise must be a small affair compared to the papacy." (*Systematic Theology*, III, p. 816.) So "if this only article remain pure on the battlefield, the Christian Church also remains pure, and in godly harmony and without any sects; but if it does not remain pure, it is not possible that any sect or fanatical spirit can be resisted" (Luther, V:1170, *Trigl.* 917:6). This article safeguards against all errors, and its acceptance will, sooner or later, it may be only in heaven, remove all deviations. In our negotiations towards Church fellowship we must begin and end with this article: "We must preach all doctrines in such a manner that at bottom we preach only justification" (Pieper, *Vortraege*, I, p. 95).

This leads to our third point: In what spirit should we work toward agreement in doctrine? First, we rely solely on the Word of God to effect the church union, the unity of doctrine. Carnal wisdom cannot show us the way. Political force cannot effect the unity. The union effected for reasons of temporal advantages is a patchwork which does not hold. "The world at the present time is sagaciously discussing how to quell the controversy and strife over doctrine and faith and to effect a compromise. . . . Let the learned, the wise, it is said, bishops, emperors, and princes, arbitrate. Each side can easily yield something. . . . Here is lack of understanding, for understanding proves by the Word that such patchwork is not according to God's will, but that doctrine, faith, and worship must be preserved pure and unadulterated; there must be no mingling with human nonsense, human opinions or wisdom. God will still support us if we deal uprightly and faithfully in these requirements, if we further and honor the Word of God and be not unthankful nor seek things that counterfeit God's Word." (Luther, XII:973.) Only that union counts which is effected by the Word of God. And we thank the Lord for whatever measure of success He in His grace and wisdom grants to our unwavering insistence on God's Word.

Next, the labor towards reuniting Christendom is carried

on in a spirit of true humility, with a heartfelt sense of the unmerited grace of God bestowed on us. Our possession of the true doctrine does not fill us with a sense of superiority over others. We know that we are by nature no more immune against doctrinal errors than they are. Nor do we demand their acceptance of our position in a dogmatical spirit. All we ask of them is to submit to the Word of God and praise with us the grace of God that opens His Word to unworthy sinners.

Dr. Pieper: "How the doctrine of God's grace creates and preserves unity is thus described by Luther (VI:36): 'The prophet here (Is. 2:4) uses a fine figure to describe the peace which cannot exist in the heart nor outwardly among men unless the heart is certain of forgiveness. And no better means can be found to remove the disunity than that which Christ uses, when with one word He puts them all on the same level, finding all of them alike guilty of sin and all under the same condemnation. . . . That creates a fellow feeling among the Christians and draws them together when they realize that all are being saved through the very same grace and know that all are equal in their lack of merit and that all are under equal guilt.' " (*Lehre u. Wehre*, 1918, p. 182.)

Next, the work of *uniting the Christians who are in disagreement with one another requires the spirit of patience*. "We must not be quick to discontinue this work, even if it takes longer than we had expected. We keep it up with great patience as long as there is, in our Christian judgment, any prospect and hope of overcoming the error." (Pieper, in *Proc., Oregon and Washington District*, 1924, p. 27.) Luther went so far as to say that they, the Reformed, "have been ensnared, with a good conscience, by a different understanding" (concerning the Lord's Supper), "and so we will gladly bear with them. If they are honest, Christ the Lord may deliver them. On the other hand, I, too, am acting with a good conscience; the other understanding has taken me captive — unless I do not understand my own position. Therefore they should bear with me, if they cannot share my position." (XVII:2051.) Of course, patience is no longer a Christian virtue when we meet with obstinate, persistent rejection of God's clear Word and the demand is made to give contradictory views equal standing. Lic. Martin Kiunke has ex-

pressed the right idea: "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" (*CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, 1947, p. 903). That was Walther's principle: "The time for breaking off fraternal relations with those also who err in non-fundamental doctrines arrives then only when they stubbornly refuse to accept the convincing testimony of Scripture" (*Lehre u. Wehre*, XIV, p.109).

Finally, God has laid a grave responsibility upon us. The great heritage which the Lutheran Church enjoys carries with it a great responsibility. The duty to make our fellow Christians sharers of the pure doctrine will not permit us to treat the agreement in doctrine as a luxury which can for the moment be laid aside; it leaves us no alternative but to insist on the acceptance of the whole truth. It is a matter of conscience. The truth of God's Word has taken hold of us, and we cannot sit quietly by while our neighbors are lacking a part of it. "His Word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (Jer. 20:9). Why, even the non-Christian knows that those who possess the truth have the sacred duty to share it with others. Mahatma Gandhi told E. Stanley Jones: "You must practice your religion without adulterating it or toning it down." And Dr. Hu Shih, the agnostic, said to a group of missionaries: "I do not believe what you believe, but if I believed half of what you say you believe, I would be more earnest than you are" (see *Lutheran Standard*, Oct. 28, 1933). Remember the urgent admonition that came to us from a leader of the Lutheran Church: "We know that we are responsible to all seeking and inquiring men that we do not withhold from them anything which the Lord would tell them and give them." (See the preceding article.) Every member of the Holy Christian Church is aflame with the desire that "an end be put to all schisms" (*The Litany*) and that perfect agreement in the doctrine be established. To that the Church must devote all her energies. The *Lutheraner* spoke in the name of Christendom when it said: "In other words: The chief concern of the Christians is that all members believe and confess the one pure doctrine of the Word of God. St. Paul inculcated this duty in 1 Cor. 1:10: 'I be-

seech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that ye all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you.' This one great thing, that we 'be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment,' is the important business of the Christians in the face of the many sects which have disrupted Christendom, and this includes that we should both study and confess the Word of God with great earnestness and see to it that others be brought to the same faithful adherence to God's Word." (1947, p. 357.)

We are reminded in *Government in the Missouri Synod* how solicitous the fathers were about preserving the unity of the doctrine. It tells, pages 164—190, how "Walther describes their oneness in faith and confession and the efforts they were making to maintain their concord." "Their chief objective was to strengthen one another in Lutheran faith and polity . . . 'to comfort, advise, admonish, and exhort one another.'" "Every attempt was made to keep discordant elements out of Synod, etc." Let us approve ourselves as worthy sons of the fathers and say with Dr. L. Fuerbringer: "I shall never forget the great earnestness that animated our fathers and their holy concern for the truth, nor the fact that they did not consider doctrinal matters of minor importance or as matters merely of different terminology and open questions, in which men may be of different opinion, as is nowadays so often the case." (*Persons and Events*, p. 177.) It is God's will and command that all Christians be one in faith and doctrine.

