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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT OF LUTHERANS IN INDIA *

According to the 1947—1949 *Directory of Churches and Missions*, about one fourth of India's 2,132,990 Protestant Christians are Lutherans. Of these 510,074 Lutherans, 212,968 belong to congregations affiliated with the United Lutheran Church in America, 10,884 with the American Lutheran Church, and 16,302 with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The rest have, or had, connection with Lutheran mission societies in Germany, Denmark, or Sweden. All these Lutheran bodies in India, except the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (M. E. L. I. M.), are members of the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India (F. E. L. C.), which was organized in 1926.

In recent years the Federation has had to pay attention to chiefly three matters in the field of internal and external relationships: 1) There has been a strong movement for changing the Federation into a more closely united Church. (A revised draft of "A Constitution for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in India" is dated July, 1948.) 2) The Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission has from time to time, and much more so in the past five or six years, sent "observers," on invitation, to the meetings of the Federation, and also in other ways shown an interest in the question of inter-Lutheran co-operation and possible union. 3) In 1947 the Anglicans and the Methodists joined with the South India United Church (mostly Presbyterians and Congregationalists) to form the Church of South India (C. S. I.). This left the Lutherans and the Baptists the only remaining large bodies of evangelical Christians in South India outside the united church, and they have accepted the invitation for "conversations" with the C. S. I.

To meet these problems, the F. E. L. C. prepared a doctrinal statement, which was printed at the M. E. L. I. M. Press, Vaniyambadi, 1949, and then submitted to the constituent members of the F. E. L. C. for study. This document consists of about 4,650 words, exclusive of the

* This doctrinal statement was published with a few minor editorial changes in its entirety in the *Lutheran World Review*, April, 1950, pp. 222 to 238. Since this document will undoubtedly be of far-reaching significance for the Lutheran Churches of India and of deep interest to all Lutherans, Missionary H. Earl Miller of the Missouri Synod was requested to prepare an evaluation of this confessional statement for our journal. — F. E. M.

600-word Foreword, and it bears the title: "Doctrinal Statement Presenting the Confessional Basis Proposed for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in India."

Why and How Prepared

For the sake of authenticity in stating the purpose and development of this doctrinal statement, we shall quote from its Foreword:

"The Executive Council of the Federation of Lutheran Churches in India in July and December of 1948 entrusted to its Committee on Lutheran Unity the task of studying afresh the contents of our Lutheran Confessions and stating them in brief and simple language, with special reference to the situation of the Church in the new, free India.

"The Statement to be prepared should have a threefold purpose: (1) It should be a brief exposition of the doctrinal basis for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in India; (2) it should serve as a preparation for discussions and joint theological study with the Church of South India; (3) it should form the basis for negotiations with the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran Mission in India regarding their entry into the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches.

"To accomplish this task it was decided by the Executive Council of the F. E. L. C. at its meeting held in Madras in December 1948 that a retreat of at least six days be organized, and to form a study group of seven members, which should do the necessary preliminary work for the retreat. Each constituent Church was given the privilege of sending two representatives. The M. E. L. I. M. [Missouri Synod] was also invited to send two representatives. The work became so absorbing and intensive that two retreats were held.

"The first retreat was held at Tirupati March 23 to 29.

"The Theses on the Word of God, The Church and the Lord's Supper were discussed again in a series of four conferences in Kodai-kanal which were attended by persons from all the Lutheran groups represented in Kodaikanal. A very large number of valuable suggestions dealt with at these conferences were later acted on by the second retreat.

"The second retreat was held at Nagercoil in the area of the M. E. L. I. M. from the 12th to the 18th of June.

"The most important result of the retreats, in the words of Dr. H. Meyer, the Chairman and leader, is this: ' . . . The rediscovery of the fact that common study of the Holy Scriptures in the communion of the Spirit does not divide, but unites us in a measure not imagined before. . . . '

We should add that 40 to 50 missionaries of the various Lutheran missions met again in two conferences that filled the dining room of the M. E. L. I. M. boarding school in Kodaikanal in May, 1950, and discussed the theses on "The Triune God" and on "Authority and the Ministries in the Church."

Table of Contents

The following is an enumeration of the articles treated in this *Doctrinal Statement*, with occasional reference to the Report of the Committee on Doctrinal Unity of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and of the Committee on Fellowship of the American Lutheran Church. Perhaps even such a superficial comparison of the American and the Indian statements may be of interest.

The Indian Statement contains the following articles: *The Triune God* (of about equal length with the American Statement's "I. God"); *Christ, The Son of God, Incarnate* (Luther's Explanation of the Second Article, thus corresponding in length and approximate content to "III. Redemption"); *The Nature of Sin* (similar to "II. Man," but about twice as long); *Justification by Faith* (covering the material of "VI. Justification" and "VII. Conversion," just a bit longer than the former); *Christian Love and Obedience, The Fruits of Justification by Faith* (about twice as long as "VIII. Sanctification"); *The Word of God* (about the same length as "V. Means of Grace, A. The Word"); *The Sacraments, A. Regeneration and Baptism* (corresponding to "VII. Conversion" and "V. Means of Grace, B. Baptism," twice as long as both combined); *The Sacraments, B. The Lord's Supper* (twice as long as "V. Means of Grace, C. The Lord's Supper"); *The Church* (almost three times as long as "IX. The Church"); *Authority and the Ministries in the Church* (corresponding in part to "X. The Ministry," but about nine times as long); *The Last Things* (not quite as long as "XII. The Last Things"); *The Relation of Creedal and Confessional Statements to the Nature of the Church* (corresponding in part to "XI. The Lutheran Confessions," but five times as long). There is no article corresponding to "IV. Election."

Some significance may be found in the order and length of the various articles. Thus, for instance, the relatively greater length of the articles on "The Fruits of Justification" and on "The Sacraments" may be accounted for by the fact that this doctrinal statement is meant to state the Lutheran position vis-à-vis the Methodists and Presbyterians and Congregationalists in the Church of South India. The seemingly inordinate length of the articles on "The Church" and on "Authority and the Ministries in the Church" is due to the

fact that these articles are meant to serve the same purpose in respect to the Anglican elements in the C. S. I.

In avoiding as much as possible old inter-Lutheran controversies which may not have so evident or important a bearing on the situation in India, a few articles were omitted which, on second thought, were deemed nevertheless necessary in order to assure true and full unity. Some of them also provide a needed antithesis to Hinduism. The program committee has therefore stated its intention to discuss in future meetings the inclusion, for instance, of articles on "Karma and Predestination" and on "Law and Gospel."

Discussion in Conferences

Those who are acquainted with the difficulties in getting agreement in formulation of doctrine on the part of the U. L. C., the A. L. C., and the Synodical Conference, may be pardoned if they are inclined to view any such doctrinal statement as this from India with suspicion from the very outset. The American churches have found that, for one thing, the variety of their background history has largely hindered agreement; but this is nothing compared with the diversity facing the committee which would formulate a united expression of faith for American missionaries of the U. L. C., A. L. C., and Missouri, together with missionaries of Germany, Denmark, and Sweden, and also intelligent Indian leaders of churches which have been founded by these various missions. With as wide representation as possible from these diverse bodies, what could result but silence or evasive ambiguity on many points of doctrine? And yet—those who were present at the meetings in which the wording of the *Statement* was debated will testify that discussion was full and frank, and there was usually sufficient evidence of a genuine attempt to state the Scriptural truth plainly.

Naturally there were differences, some of them rather fundamental. Now and then one or the other of the conferees made an un-Lutheran, un-Biblical, remark. But he was immediately and unmistakably corrected. More often, apparent differences were due to an unfamiliar mode of expression, which was cleared up by further discussion. Certain phrases had, by repeated local usage, taken on a peculiar meaning or a restricted technical sense for some groups. One must remember that here were men not only from different seminaries, but with different national backgrounds.

Then, too, suspicion was not entirely absent, especially at first or on the part of those meeting for the first time. One group would watch for possible false doctrine lurking behind apparently innocent

phrases used by another group. This group, on the other hand, would resent what seemed to them an imperious attempt to insist on binding all others to one's own accustomed formulations even when these apparently went beyond Scripture in their inferences, like rabbinical hedges around the Law. But as the meetings progressed and the men became better acquainted, the atmosphere became more and more one of mutual confidence and of a united endeavor to present the truth of the Bible both in clarity and charity. Not a little of this was due to the personality and ability of the chairman. This does not mean that there was 100-per-cent agreement, but there was undeniably much progress, for which we thank the Lord of the Church humbly and sincerely.

Some Remarks on the Statement

So much for the conferences. As for the resultant *Statement*, we can truthfully say that it is far better than could ordinarily have been expected. While a different wording might be preferred in some places, there is very little with which we feel that we must still disagree. If in some places we are a bit disappointed in not finding the words which we think would defend the doctrine against possible misinterpretation, we are equally pleased in finding such definiteness and clarity in other places where vagueness might have been expected if the purpose had been to leave room for difference of interpretation.

If the *Statement* is not entirely satisfactory, neither is it yet completed. It is still open to changes. For instance, in the latest conference in Kodaikanal, in May, 1950, it was decided to recommend that to offset Hindu misconceptions the article on "The Triune God" should be expanded by statements on His personality, sovereignty, holiness, and love. A further recommendation was that the statement on the New Testament development of the office of bishops and on the benefit of such office should be reconsidered.

Some of the diction of the *Statement* may be strange to American ears. It is of composite authorship, Americans, Germans, Swedes, Danes, and Indians having worked together on it. Moreover, some favorite phrases were used without the connotations of which they might be suspected. For instance, the writer of these lines feared that the phrase "the living Word of God," which is used three times (it occurs 22 times without the adjective), might conceal some sort of Barthian distinction. And yet, before he could express this doubt publicly, he heard the secretary of the committee which is charged with the responsibility for the wording say in an essay: "We cannot

think of the Word as inanimate. We speak of a dead orthodoxy but not of a dead Word of God. The Word of God is living, whether spoken or written. The phrase 'the living Word' as we have used it in our *Statement* is good as far as we go, but unless we use the adjective 'living' in every instance where we speak of the Word of God we are setting up an antithesis which we do not intend."

There are other expressions which can likewise be explained in conference, but which should where possible be changed in the *Statement* itself to avoid misinterpretation of intention. A few examples may be sufficient.

To avoid the idea of servile fear, the familiar phrase "Fear, love, and trust in God" was changed in the article on "The Nature of Sin." It reads: "By sin man ceased to worship, love, and trust God above all things." In the words of one of our conferees, however, "the word 'worship' . . . seems to require as much exegesis as the Catechism's 'fear.'"

Under "Christian Love and Obedience, the Fruits of Justification by Faith," the statement "The life in Christ, if it is sound, is bound to grow in holiness unto the full measure of the stature of Christ" may be misused in the interests of perfectionism. It has been suggested that the words "which perfection, however, is not reached in this life" be added at the end or that the words "unto the full measure" be changed to "toward the full measure."

The sentence "Christ, the central subject and at the same time the Lord and Master of the Holy Scriptures, is the ultimate touchstone of every Biblical book and word" in the article "The Word of God" might lead to an eclecticism which would reject any part of the Bible that does not refer directly to Christ.

Another paragraph in the same article reads: "Therefore the Holy Scriptures are of supreme importance as a means through which the Holy Spirit testifies of Christ and thus creates and strengthens faith." It has been objected that, as it stands, the indefinite article "a" leaves too much opening for enthusiasm and that the sentence should be strengthened by saying that the Holy Scriptures are "the all-important means." The next paragraph says: "Therefore also the Holy Scriptures are the only source of doctrine and the only norm and authority according to which all doctrine, preaching, confession, and life in the Church should be judged."

Under "The Sacraments" it is said: "Christ is the Head of the Church. Therefore, to become a member of the Church is the organic

and dynamic ingrafting of the believer into Christ." It has been asked: "What is meant by the *organic* ingrafting?"

In the article "The Church," the following has been challenged as a disputed exegetical point: "The One Church is ever one and cannot be rent. In John 17 it is not this oneness for which Jesus prays. Existing as it does, it is the subject neither for prayer nor for exhortation. It is the *manifestation* of this oneness already existing for which Jesus prays and which is the purpose of Paul's exhortation that we may all stand as one in the Name, the Word, and the Truth."

A further paragraph in the same article reads: "On the other hand, the Church, consisting of believers in Christ whom the Holy Spirit unites in congregations for common worship and testimony, is a communion of human beings and as such perceptible, and it becomes perceptible as the Church of Christ by the proclamation of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments, and the works of Christian love. If in any congregation or church organization any one of these marks is wanting, it is in danger of losing its character as a member of the One, Holy Catholic, Apostolic, Christian Church." Here the question has been raised whether adding the expression "works of Christian love" to the marks of the Church is not a confusing of objective and subjective signs and liable to misunderstanding on the part of a pietist. Otherwise, we might as well add suffering and the other "marks" to which Luther refers.

Under "Authority and the Ministries in the Church" occurs the following, which is open to question and is to be reconsidered: "As, however, the New Testament Scriptures show that the ministry of bishops developed in Apostolic times, we hold that the office of a bishop as a shepherd of all pastors is of great benefit to the Church. The bishop, in an independent position, will be able to watch that all the ministrations in the Church are carried out in accordance with the supreme authority in the Church, viz., the Word of God. Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1 ff.; Tit. 1:7 ff." The Scripture references do not describe a bishop as we know the office today. It has also been suggested that the wording be changed to "the office of a bishop . . . *may* be of great benefit." That the idea of Apostolic Succession did not underlie this article may be seen from the following in the article on "The Church": "This One, Holy, Catholic Church is also apostolic, not because of the union of its members in any one organization which claims to possess historical connection with the Apostles, but because the faith in Christ Jesus which all members of the Church have in common is the same faith that was in the hearts of the

Apostles and which was proclaimed by them. This faith has been and still is perpetuated by the unbroken testimony of believers. The Holy Scriptures are the permanent and authoritative record of the Apostolic truth, which is the ground of the Christian faith." Nor was it intended that the prerogatives of local congregations should be usurped by bishops. This is seen, for instance, in the following quotation from the article on "The Church": "Local congregations and church organizations may out of Christian love consider all professing Christians members of the Church, and on the other hand may excommunicate members whom they deem to live as impenitent sinners. . . ."

As could be expected, we have dealt mostly with what we consider defects in the *Statement*. However, even in the examples quoted also some of the excellencies shine through. We could provide a number of samples of good clear testimony, but to do full justice we should have to print the whole *Statement*.

Nevertheless, there are several deficiencies of a more serious nature, which must be corrected before the *Statement* can be accorded our full approval. The following should be mentioned here:

1) Although it is well stated that "the Holy Scriptures are the only source of doctrine and the only norm and authority according to which all doctrine, preaching, confession, and life in the Church should be judged," there is nowhere a clear statement that the Holy Scriptures are inerrant or infallible.

2) The article on "The Lord's Supper" does not touch the necessary distinction between the Lutheran and the Calvinistic teaching on this important doctrine. Paragraph 2a reads: "The Lord's Supper is essentially the mystery of the real personal presence of our Lord Jesus Christ according to His promise, 'Where two or three are gathered together . . .' (Matt. 18:20), and 'Lo, I am with . . .' (Matt. 28:20)." The Scripture passages cited here do not refer to the special sacramental presence and should be replaced by the Words of Institution and 1 Cor. 10:16. There is no clear expression of the truth that with the bread and wine the communicant orally partakes of the Lord's body and blood.

3) The article on "The Last Things" says correctly: ". . . God . . . will terminate history and time itself, consummating His plan by a definite act, namely, the return of Jesus Christ in the same manner as he ascended into heaven." However, in view of the prevalence of millennialism also in otherwise evangelical and Biblical circles, a more pointed rejection of this error is needed.

4) The concluding words of the *Statement* read: "Though the basis for the unity of the Church is oneness in the Lord Himself, nevertheless, for the fuller manifestation of this unity, agreement regarding the basic doctrines which are of the essence of the Gospel, clearly taught by the Word of God, is necessary. The way to such agreement is a fresh, unbiased devotion to the Word of God in a common endeavour to understand and state the truth." We believe that the present situation demands a clearer statement concerning inter-church relationships, in opposition to doctrinal indifferentism and unionistic laxity.

In order that all Indian church members affiliated with the Missouri Synod, particularly the pastors, may be able to study the *Statement*, it has been translated into the Tamil and the Malayalam languages. The U.L.C. missionaries are having it translated also into Telugu for the benefit of their Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church.

May the Holy Spirit, the Author of all genuine truth and unity and love, graciously guide all who are engaged in the study and emendation of this *Statement*, so that the result may be a correct and clear confession of the faith.

H. EARL MILLER