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The Arnoldshain Theses on the Lord's Supper

By PAUL M. BRETSCHER

I. INTRODUCTION

WE are herewith submitting a translation of the *Arnoldshainer Abendmahlsthesen*, followed by some concluding observations. These theses are the net result of discussions regarding the meaning of the Lord's Supper carried on between 1947 and 1957 by a commission of Lutheran, Reformed, and *Union* theologians representing the Evangelical Church of Germany. These theologians formulated and approved the theses after many deliberations November 1 and 2, 1957. Among those who served on the commission we note such distinguished names as Drs. E. Bizer, G. Bornkamm, Peter Brunner, Friedrich Delekat, Hellmut Gollwitzer, Hans Iwand, Joachim Jeremias, Ernst Käsemann, K. G. Kuhn, Walter von Loewenich, Otto Michel, W. Niesel, Edmund Schlink, H. Vogel, and Ernst Wolf. The source of our information states, "The approval of Dr. Sommerlath, who also was a member of the commission, could not be obtained." The text of the theses appears in the *Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirchenzeitung* (XII [Sept. 15, 1958], 302—303). This is the official organ of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, a constituent member of the Evangelical Church of Germany.

The same issue of the *Kirchenzeitung* contains a lengthy commentary on the theses prepared by Professor Peter Brunner of the University of Heidelberg. This commentary is of invaluable importance for an understanding of the intended meaning of the theses. Professor Brunner lays bare the significance of each thesis and points up the meaning of important terms and phrases. In the latter part of his article he discusses such practical issues as the significance of these theses for the several church groups federated in the Evangelical Church of Germany and the need of thorough studies of other doctrinal matters which at present divide these churches. He warns against overrating the theses and becoming unduly optimistic. He states that only theologians, not churches, participated in the discussions and drafted the theses. He informs

the reader that the theses have been referred for consideration by the *Rat* of the Evangelical Church of Germany to church administrations, theological faculties, *kirchliche Hochschulen*, and have also been made public for the benefit of congregations. Obviously the leaders of the Evangelical Church of Germany are attaching great importance to these theses. One cannot but infer that in spite of Professor Brunner's strictures these theses are expected to contribute toward the establishment of altar fellowship between churches of the Lutheran, Reformed, and *Union* confessions, eventuating in church fellowship of these three confessional churches and possibly even in one united evangelical church of Germany. Toward the close of his article, Professor Brunner proposes that the following three questions be considered by readers of the theses:

1. Do the eight theses, in particular details or in general, contain doctrines which contradict Scripture?
2. Do the eight theses really teach what is fundamental for an understanding of the essence, gift, and reception of the Lord's Supper?
3. If these eight theses contain nothing which contradicts Scripture, and if they really express the irremissible essentials of the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, what will this ascertainment mean for the confessional obligation of the respective church?

In our translation of the theses we made a sincere effort to be guided by the interpretative comments made by Professor Brunner. Whether we succeeded in every instance to catch also the nuances of his meticulous analysis, we cannot tell. For the sake of the American reader who is not accustomed to read and ponder a series of theses, least of all a series of sometimes ponderous German theses, we took the liberty to take apart involved sentences and to state their apparent meaning in brief main clauses. This applies in particular to Thesis Four, regarding which Professor Brunner observes, "Probably the acceptance or rejection of all theses will be determined by this one." Because of its singular importance we are submitting Thesis Four also in its German formulation.

A final note before we submit our translation of the theses. The set of theses is introduced by the commission with a number of relevant statements. From this introduction we quote only the second paragraph, which seems to us to be the most important.

These theses do not claim to offer a complete statement of the theological doctrine regarding the Lord's Supper. Therefore individual members of the commission did not insist on inclusion of certain statements important to them individually. They are, however, persuaded that in so doing they have not, for the sake of compromise, held back anything which is essential to an understanding of the essence, gift, and reception of the Holy Supper.

II. THE THESES

What do we who are members of the one apostolic church believe to be the decisive content in the Biblical record of the Lord's Supper?

Thesis 1

a. The Lord's Supper which we celebrate has its origin in the institution and command of Jesus Christ. He is the Lord, who gave Himself for us into death and rose again.

b. In the Lord's Supper the exalted Lord invites His own to His table and has them participate even now in that fellowship in the kingdom of God which lies in the future.

Thesis 2

a. In the celebration of the Lord's Supper Jesus Christ Himself is active. He acts in and through the activity of the church. He acts as the Lord, who is present by means of His Word in the Holy Spirit.

b. The Lord's Supper, like the sermon, Baptism, and private absolution, is one of those means through which Christ appropriates to us the gifts of the saving Gospel.

Thesis 3

a. The Lord's Supper is an act of divine worship. This act takes place when the congregation is assembled in the name of Jesus.

b. In the Lord's Supper the meal is inseparably connected with the proclamation of the saving benefit of the death of Jesus. This proclamation is made in the preached Word.

c. Accompanied by prayer, thanksgiving, and the glorification of God, bread and wine are taken, the words of institution spoken, and bread and wine offered to the congregation to eat and to drink.

d. In the Lord's Supper we remember the death of Christ, through whom God has once and for all times reconciled the world. In the Lord's Supper we confess the presence among us of the resurrected Lord and, as those called to the glory which will be ours at the consummation of all things, we joyfully await His return.

Thesis 4

German Version: Die Worte, die unser Herr Jesus Christus beim Reichen des Brotes und des Kelches spricht, sagen uns, was er selbst in diesem Mahle allen, die hinzutreten, gibt: Er, der gekreuzigte und auferstandene Herr, lässt sich in seinem für alle in den Tod gegebenen Leib und seinem für alle vergossenen Blut durch sein verheißendes Wort mit Brot und Wein von uns nehmen und nimmt uns damit kraft des Heiligen Geistes in den Sieg seiner Herrschaft, auf dasz wir im Glauben an seine Verheißung Vergebung der Sünden, Leben und Seligkeit haben.

Translation: The words which our Lord Jesus Christ speaks in the course of the distribution of bread and wine tell us what He Himself gives in this meal to all who approach His altar. What does He give? He, the crucified and risen Lord, allows Himself to be taken by us in His body given into death for all and in His blood shed for all. He allows Himself to be taken by us with bread and wine through His Word of promise. In this way He receives us, by virtue of the Holy Spirit, into His triumphant rulership in order that we, by believing in His promise, might have forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.

Thesis 5

Accordingly the event which takes place in the Lord's Supper is not adequately described

- a. if one teaches that through the Lord's words of institution bread and wine are changed into a supernatural substance so that bread and wine cease to be bread and wine;
- b. if one teaches that a re-enactment of the soteriological event (*Heilsgeschehen*) takes place in the Lord's Supper;
- c. if one teaches that in the Lord's Supper a naturelike (*naturhaft*) or supernatural substance is offered to the communicants;
- d. if one teaches that there is involved in the Lord's Supper a parallel eating: a bodily eating and a spiritual eating, and that these two kinds of eating take place independently of each other;
- e. if one teaches that bodily eating in itself has a saving effect, or that participation in the body and blood of Christ is a mere spiritual (*geistiger*) process.

Thesis 6

- a. Jesus Christ, who has delivered us from God's wrathful judgment which results in death, is at the same time the first Member and Head of a new creation;

b. Through Him we who receive His body and His blood are united in His body, the Church, and share in the promised new covenant which God instituted through the blood of Jesus.

c. The Lord's Supper places us into the fellowship of the brethren and thus certifies that whatever enslaves and separates us in this life is overcome in Christ and that the Lord establishes in the midst of pardoned sinners the beginning of a new humanity.

Thesis 7

a. The Lord's Supper enables us to walk the path of the cross of Christ. It directs our path into the stark realities of this world. But when we are weak, the grace of God is powerful. When we die, we live with Him. His victory is still hidden behind temptation (*Anfechtung*) and suffering. Therefore the Lord supplies us with nourishment through His meal in order to strengthen us for the battle into which He sends His own, and in order to arm us against every kind of enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*) and every degree of lassitude. For He does not want that we, by indulging in false dreams, proleptically wrest to ourselves what is reserved for us in the future. On the other hand, He does not want that we, in a spirit of dejection, give up hope.

b. In the congregation to which He gives Himself in the Lord's Supper we are brethren. This fellowship lives only in that love with which He first loved us. Even as He had pity on us—the Righteous One among those who are unrighteous, the Liberated One among those who are not free, the Exalted One among those of low degree—so also we should share with those who are in need of our help all that we are and possess.

Thesis 8

a. Faith receives what has been promised it and builds on this promise and not on its own unworthiness;

b. The Word of God warns us against every manner of disregard and misuse of Holy Communion in order that we might not sin against the majesty of this gift and thus invite upon us God's judgment;

c. Because the Lord is rich in mercy toward all who call upon Him, all members of His congregation are invited to His meal, and forgiveness of sins is promised to all who hunger after the righteousness of God.

III. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

There is much solid Lutheran thinking on the Lord's Supper in these theses. We note at least a faint recognition of the *manducatio oralis* and the *manducatio indignorum*, two cornerstones in the

Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper. We note also that these theses stress the great spiritual benefits of the Lord's Supper. They regard the Lord's Supper a means of grace. They contain an acceptable statement on faith. They warn against disregard and misuse of the Lord's Supper. They direct attention to the love of God inviting distressed sinners to come to the holy meal. They look forward to eating and drinking this meal anew in the age to come. Finally, and this is most gratifying, they do not deal with the Lord's Supper in isolation from the rest of the Order of the Holy Communion, but relate it to the total worship. This is all to the good. It is easy enough to be seized by a sense of awe and reverence when the celebration of the Lord's Supper takes place but to regard the rest of the divine service as a mere framework which provides the setting for the celebration of the holy meal.

And yet we must register grave concerns regarding these theses. Though Thesis Six speaks of "receiving the body and blood," Thesis Four in particular leaves us in a conflicting maze of thought. It is not clear and definite. Somehow we miss Luther's definition of the Sacrament of the Altar with its ringing words, "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink." Thesis Four places the emphasis on the gift of the Lord Himself. He condescends, as it were, to let the communicant take Him. The Lutheran Symbols do not have this emphasis.

The theses reflect the findings of recent New Testament scholarship regarding the meaning of the Lord's Supper, in particular, of the words of institution. One immediately senses, as he reads these theses, that he is not only in the company of Lutherans like Edmund Schlink and Peter Brunner but also in the company of Reformed and *Union* theologians like Joachim Jeremias, Hellmut Gollwitzer, and Ernst Käsemann. Nevertheless, modern insights into the New Testament statements regarding the Lord's Supper provided by modern exegesis, do not, so we firmly believe, introduce significantly new data which were not available in the decade prior to World War II. These data were singled out and critically examined by Michael Reu in his *Can We Still Hold to the Lutheran Doctrine of the Lord's Supper?* (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1941). They have to do primarily with the gift which the

communicant receives in the Lord's Supper and revolve about the meaning of "body" and "blood."

The theses evidently regard John 6:52b-58 as a *sedes doctrinae* for the correct interpretation of the Lord's Supper. For the interpretation of John 6 in the Lutheran Symbols the reader is referred to the Formula of Concord (SD VII 61), where John 6 is interpreted as referring to spiritual eating and drinking. Professor Brunner shares the modern view and operates, in support of the theses, with John 6:57 to demonstrate that Jesus does not differentiate between "eating Him" (v. 57) and "eating His body and drinking His blood" (v. 56). Yet there is at least a probability that verses 57 and 58 in John 6 are a recapitulation of what Jesus had said about spiritual eating and drinking in John 6:32-51. In any case, to interpret John 6:52b-58 as referring to sacramental eating and drinking, however enticing this interpretation might be for a Lutheran exegete, ought not, since it is still a controversial passage, be employed in a statement on the Lord's Supper which proposes to set forth dogmatically what the New Testament doctrine of the Lord's Supper is. Similarly, the one-sided preference in modern New Testament exegesis for the Paul-Luke phrase "in My blood" (1 Cor. 11:25; Luke 22:20; the RSV unfortunately regards the Luke passage to be a less authenticated reading), with a complete disregard of the reading in Mark and Matthew (Mark 14:24; Matt. 26:28), does not warrant the conclusion drawn by modern exegetes, including Professor Brunner, that "eating and drinking the body and blood" is equated in Scripture with "receiving Him," that is, His person. For though the communicant does, of course, by eating and drinking *His* body and blood receive Christ, this is *not* the emphasis which the words of institution carry. For those who resort to the above equation the danger arises of interpreting "eating and drinking" figuratively and paying mere lip service to the *manducatio oralis*. Furthermore, this interpretation easily leads to a doctrine of the "Real Presence" not evident in the words of institution and not in accord with the interpretation of the Lutheran Symbols.

There are other weaknesses in the theses, some of which are admitted by Professor Brunner himself. The theses are silent on the act of consecration, whereas Paul in 1 Cor. 10:16 expressly

asserts it. The theses by-pass also the Pauline phrase "the night when He was betrayed" (1 Cor. 11:23). The arguments against inclusion of this phrase as detailed by Professor Brunner are to this reviewer not at all convincing.

We return once more to Thesis Four. We realize that it must have been a most trying experience for the members of the commission to arrive at a formulation of this thesis satisfactory to all concerned. Professor Brunner writes, "We struggled most intensively regarding the formulation of this thesis." But the thesis appears to us to be a compromise or rather an effort to embody in one statement both the Reformed and the Lutheran doctrines of the Lord's Supper. Is it any wonder that Professor Brunner, who is a model for clear, simple, and precise writing, needed almost seven long columns in the *Kirchenzeitung* to elucidate the meaning of this thesis? But if that thesis is still not clear to one who has tried to follow Professor Brunner's interpretation in every detail, what will pastors and teachers do with that thesis when they are to preach on, or teach, the Scriptural doctrine of the Lord's Supper? In any case it appears that Lutherans must again bethink themselves and honestly face the question raised by Michael Reu in 1941, "Can we still hold to the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper?" Michael Reu thought we could. Can *we*? This reviewer believes that, as a result of these theses, the Lutheran churches not only in Germany but also in all parts of the world are facing a crisis of far-reaching consequence, perhaps another Marburg. Was Professor Hermann Sasse too pessimistic when in one of his *Briefe an lutherische Pastoren* (No. 3, January 1949) he sounded this warning: "Do we not hear it over and over again that the modern exegesis of the texts dealing with the Lord's Supper compel us to abandon the classical Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper advanced in the era of the Reformation against the Reformed Church? Has the time not come, we are asked, for evangelical Christians to engage in a responsible conversation regarding the Lord's Supper (*verbindliches Abendmahlsgespräch*), to infer the consequences of such a conversation, and then to formulate a doctrine of the Lord's Supper acceptable to all evangelically minded Christians?" Professor Sasse wrote this 10 years ago. The *verbindliches Abendmahlsgespräch* has been held over a period of

10 years under the direction of the Evangelical Church of Germany. The results of that *Abendmahlsgespräch* are now a matter of record: the Arnoldshain theses. We fear that these theses in their present form may well become the basis for a doctrine on the Lord's Supper agreeable to many Lutherans, Reformed, and *Union* alike.

Can *we* still hold to the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper? Yes, we can if we attempt to do so in the fear of God and mindful of Paul's and Luther's interpretation of the blessed Sacrament. "Whoever stands on the foundation of Lutheranism will be persuaded that our theology, like our church with its practices at this point [the doctrine of the Lord's Supper], most faithfully followed the directives of Paul" (Werner Elert in *Morphologie des Luther-tums*, I, 280). As for Luther, we are reminded of the first paragraph of Benjamin Lotz' article "Those Recalcitrant Lutherans" (*The Christian Century*, October 6, 1943), which speaks to Lutherans today:

The year 1529 is a good time to begin. The place is Marburg on the river Lahn. The *dramatis personae* are Luther, Zwingli, Oecolampadius, Bucer, Melancthon, Jonas, Osiander. The doctrine of the Lord's Supper is the greatest stumbling block. Is this view of Luther a "remnant of papistical leaven," as Zwingli asserts? "You have a different spirit," the ex-monk declares. He cannot play the hypocrite, for it is a dangerous thing to act contrary to one's conscience. The flowers in his hand will wilt, but not the words he writes: *Hoc est corpus meum*.

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