Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 31 Article 2

1-1-1960

The Altpreussische Union. Its Status and Significance Today with Special Reference to the Ecumenical Movement

Matthias Schulz Jr.
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Siegfried J. Lehmann

The *Altpreussische Union*

Its Status and Significance Today with Special Reference to the Ecumenical Movement

By MATTHIAS SCHULZ
Tr. by SIEGFRIED J. LEHMANN

THE *Altpreussische Union* of 1817 is not only a past event of historical interest, but it also deserves to be recognized as a significant factor in its effect on the contemporary scene. It continues to be effective in the church organization known as the EKU *(Evangelische Kirche der Union)*, which stems from this union and through it exerts a definite influence on the life of the church in Germany. Moreover, it continues to be even more effective by reason of the principles on which it was based and which by no means apply only to Germany.

The Prussian Union of 1817 raises a question that is relevant in the present-day ecumenical movement and to which all churches must find an answer. It is this: Is it not possible to proceed similarly today in overcoming confessional differences and thus achieve the unification of all the churches? The *Altpreussische Union* could then be regarded as a precedent and a pattern for the solution of the entire confessional question. Can it serve as such a pattern?

I

An historical review may be in place at the beginning of our discussion, especially as an aid for American readers. In the Prussian state at the beginning of the 19th century, there existed two churches, confessionally distinct and separated from each other. One was the Evangelical Lutheran Church *(Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche)*, to which most of the Prussian people belonged; the other, the Reformed Church, which had received considerable promotion through the influence of the Prussian royal house of the Hohenzollern ever since Elector Johann Sigismund of Brandenburg had joined the Reformed Church in 1613. A change took place, however, in the year 1817. On September 27 of that year the reigning Prussian King, Frederick William III, issued a proclamation, or

royal decree *(Kabinettsorder)*, which effected a union of the two churches whose confessions had previously kept them apart.

In this royal decree Frederick William, first of all, expressed his desire to bring about a union of the hitherto divided churches, namely, the Reformed and the Lutheran, by merging them into an Evangelical Christian Church. This, he felt, was a God-pleasing deed. Previous attempts to achieve it met insurmountable difficulties on account of the then prevailing sectarian spirit, but now a better spirit was to overcome these difficulties. Under its influence nonessentials would be brushed aside. However, the fundamentals of Christianity *(die Hauptsache im Christentum)* on which both denominations were in agreement were to be retained. In this union neither the Reformed Church would be absorbed by the Lutheran Church nor vice-versa. Both would rather continue to retain their particular convictions; only from now on these should no longer be a cause for separation.

Simultaneously with this decree a proclamation which required the establishment of altar fellowship was issued. A common service book *(Agende)* from which doctrinal differences had been removed was issued also. An intense persecution of the protesting Lutherans began in 1830 in Silesia. Severe penalties for disobedience were inflicted: confiscation of all churches, prohibition of worship services, imprisonment of pastors, punishment of all members who followed their pastors. The resistance of this group caused the king to issue a new decree on Feb. 28, 1834, in which he stated the following:

> The union does not intend to abolish the existing confessions of faith. The union furthermore does not annul the authority of the confessional writings of either church. To join the union implies merely that one gives expression to a spirit of moderation and restraint which does not view a difference in certain points of doctrine of the other confession as grounds for withholding external church fellowship from the adherents of that confession.[1]

These two decrees have frequently been compared with each other and have been given different interpretations from the very beginning. Those Lutherans who stayed in the territorial church *(Landeskirche)* evaluated them thus: In issuing the first decree the

[1] This "external" church fellowship in reality involves the most central concern *(das Innerlichste)* of the church, namely, the means of grace, through which the Holy Spirit works faith in man's heart.

king had purposed to create a new Evangelical Christian Church with a common confession. The second order, however, had changed the situation fundamentally. The intended union in which consent to a common confession was required *(Konsensus-Union)* had now developed into a union of federated churches *(föderative Union).*[2] Because such a drastic moderation of the original intentions of the king had occurred, these Lutherans concluded that they could remain in the state church with a good conscience and accept the union as planned by the king. The protesting Lutherans, known as the Old Lutherans *(Altlutheraner),* on the other hand, remained firm in their opposition to it. They stood ready to suffer all, to leave their fatherland, and to emigrate to Australia or America rather than to bow to the wish of the king. They could find no essential difference between the two decrees.

Which view is the correct one? Let us listen to one who is among the best-informed regarding recent developments and who himself is not an Old Lutheran. In his authoritative work *Über das Wesen der Preussischen Union,* published in 1939, Walter Geppert points out that the decree of 1834 cannot be interpreted as opposing the one of 1817. "The only difference consists in the fact that the order of 1834 affirms *verbis expressis* what the order of 1817 did not deny, namely, that it would continue to be the privilege of the individual — congregations or individual persons — to retain differing doctrinal opinions which are nonessential to the unity of both churches but from which the 'unfortunate sectarian spirit' must be exorcised." (P. 98)

Geppert is right. A close examination of both decrees shows that also according to the first one an absorption of the one confession by the other was not intended. It specifies only that the points on which mutual agreement exists were to be stressed and that specific teachings were not to be cause for division. These points were given even stronger expression in the second decree.

By summarizing briefly the intent that the decrees have in common we shall be able to establish the following principles of the Prussian Union:

---

[2] For a similar interpretation compare Reinhold Seeberg, *Die Kirche Deutschlands im 19. Jahrhundert* (Leipzig: A. C. Deichert'sche Verlag, 1903), p. 77. A *Konsensus-Union* is a union of two churches on the basis of a common confession. A union by federation *(föderative Union),* on the other hand, is a union, or coalition, in which existing confessions remain in force.

1. Both confessional groups, the Lutheran and the Reformed, are in agreement on "the fundamentals of Christianity" *(in der Hauptsache im Christentum).*

2. The confessions of both groups retain their authority.

3. The remaining differences in doctrine are not church divisive.

A critical examination of these principles results in the following preliminary remarks:

1. What are the fundamentals of Christianity in which both confessions agree? It is significant that these are not defined. From the Lutheran point of view one would have to ask, above all: Do not the fundamentals of Christianity also include the *doctrine of the means of grace:* the doctrine of the Word of God, the doctrine of the Sacrament of Baptism and of the Sacrament of the Altar? It is evident that *in these areas* the two confessions are by no means in agreement.

2. But if this is the case, then the authority of both confessions cannot be maintained. For they exclude each other quite evidently in the above-mentioned points. They are related to each other as truth and error.

3. If nevertheless a church fellowship is established, then the specific differences in doctrine of both confessional churches are reduced to private opinions, which are divested of the authority of the church.

Taking the whole situation into consideration, one must agree with Geppert when he says in his book: "The union meant in reality that no one could remain faithful to his confession without putting himself diametrically in opposition to the union and bearing the consequences of that opposition, as the strict Lutherans in Silesia did. The Lutheran Confessions, which excluded fellowship with the Reformed Church, have ceased to exist in Prussia. What remained were certain Lutheran elements *(allerhand Lutherisches)* but not the Lutheran Confessions with their claim of exclusive authority for the Lutheran Church." (P. 98)

II

It would lead too far afield to trace the development which the Prussian Union has undergone during the 100 years since it was founded. But it is in the scope of our theme to ask the question:

What is its present status? Has it remained what it was originally, or have essential changes taken place?

In answering this question we have to revert to the period after the First World War (1914—18), which marks a new epoch and in which a new beginning was made by force of circumstances. At that time the system of state-church government to which the Prussian Union owed its origin had collapsed. By his abdication the king of Prussia had lost his position as *summus episcopus.* The church had gained her freedom. She could manage her affairs without interference from the state. What was the result? It is revealed in the constitution which the *Evangelische Kirche der Preussischen Union* drew up on Sept. 29, 1922. The preamble of this constitution says:

> Faithful to the heritage of the fathers, the Evangelical Territorial Church of the older provinces of Prussia stands on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as given in Holy Scriptures, the living Son of God, who was crucified and rose for us, the Lord of the church, and acknowledges the continuing authority of her confessions: the apostolic and the other confessions of the ancient church, furthermore the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and Luther's Small and Large Catechism in Lutheran congregations, the Heidelberg Catechism in the Reformed congregations, as well as other confessions where they are in force.

In his book *Grundlagen des evangelischen Kirchenrechtes,* 1928, Holstein sees the actual status of the Prussian Union set forth in this preamble. In it, he maintains, the essential, Biblical, common core of both confessions has been enunciated, "the transcending content of faith, which rises above the doctrinal content of either confession." That means, speaking in the words of the royal decree, that the fundamentals of Christianity, on which both confessions are in agreement, are present, and Holstein thinks that thereby an important step forward has been taken. He points out that for the first time in the history of the Prussian Union, the existing but latent consensus had been raised to an explicit consensus in the aforementioned preamble.[3] Until then it had been tacitly assumed that the two confessions agreed in the fundamentals. But now for the first time an attempt was made to articulate these funda-

[3] Günther Holstein, *Die Grundlagen des evangelischen Kirchenrechtes* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1928), p. 257.

mentals: It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the living Son of God, who was crucified and rose for us, the Lord of the church. This paves the way from a union of federated churches to a *Konsensus-Union.*

This view of Holstein has been disputed. Geppert says: "A specifically Lutheran and Reformed confessional agreement was not intended here, but we have before us a 'common Christian' confession to which all the denominations of the world, which accept the Apostles' Creed, can subscribe. It was designed to stress the sonship and the resurrection of Jesus and thereby to provide protection against inroads of liberalism" (p. 405). According to Geppert therefore, the original character of the Prussian Union had not been changed by the preamble.

Over against this, one is constrained to say that in any event the tendency is evident here to advance to a *Konsensus-Union.* It is an initial attempt to state that which is common to both confessions, be it ever so brief and general.

It can hardly be considered erroneous to see a necessary inner dynamic at work here, one inherent in the first principle of the union. If one believes to have achieved agreement in the fundamentals, then the desire arises to formulate these fundamentals in some way. Such a procedure is necessary for proper order in the church. A mere federated union, in which anyone can ultimately believe what he wishes, is in the long run not only unsatisfactory but also impossible. A church which desires to exist and possess vitality must know what she believes. That this need is felt but little in Germany is to be explained by the peculiar conditions that exist in the territorial (formerly state) form of church government, whereby the existence of the church is safeguarded, at least for a while, through tradition and forces beyond the church. But this inner dynamic exerts pressure to advance beyond given conditions.

This observation is confirmed when we now look at the reorganization of the *Altpreussische Union* after the Second World War. Shocking things had happened. The Third Reich had helped the *Deutsche Christen* into the saddle. At the direction of the government the *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (DEK) had been established, thereby bringing all territorial churches in Germany to the brink of catastrophe. As a countermeasure the Confessing

Church *(Bekennende Kirche)* was founded, which bravely resisted interference by the state. This church wanted to confess, but she did not have a formulated confession, although she tried in what is known as the *Barmen Declaration* to establish one with special reference to her relation to the state. The influence of the Confessing Church became evident everywhere after the war when the Third Reich had collapsed, and it also was a determining factor in the establishment of the *Evangelische Kirche der altpreussischen Union* when the latter was reorganized in 1951.

The reorganization, first of all, brought about legal changes. Corresponding to the political conditions in Germany after the war, the existing centralization of the church was relaxed. The former church provinces became independent provincial or member churches, which independently govern themselves and establish their own laws. The task of the overarching *Unionskirche* and her offices, then, consists in maintaining the spiritual ties between the individual provincial or member churches and in providing a uniformity of concerns.

More important than the constitutional changes, however, is the confessional reorganization which the EKU underwent after the Second World War. The fundamental article with which the new constitution begins, and which replaces the above-quoted preamble of 1922, reads as follows in its first four paragraphs:

1. The *Evangelische Kirche der altpreussischen Union* confesses Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, who was crucified for us, rose again, and is exalted at the right hand of God, and for whom she waits.
2. She is founded on the prophetic and apostolic witness of Holy Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament.
3. She confesses, with the fathers of the Reformation, that Holy Scriptures are the sole source and norm of our faith and that salvation is received by faith alone.
4. She witnesses to her faith, in communion with the early church, through the ancient creeds: the Apostolic, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creed.

At a glance one can notice here a development of the first principle of the union which we pointed out. The "fundamentals of both confessions" *(Kerngehalt der beiden Bekenntnisse)*, as Hol-

stein calls them, or the things held in common in Christianity *(das Gemeinsame im Christentum)*, as the decree of 1817 called them, are stressed far more here than in the preamble of 1922. In the former only the risen Christ was mentioned — to this now are added the *sola Scriptura* and the *sola fide*.

Yet this is only one aspect of the matter. In this connection it is instructive to read what Peter Brunner writes about the reorganization of 1951 in his book *Das lutherische Bekenntnis in der Union* (pp. 56 ff.). He is in full accord with pars. 1—4. But he then correctly observes that they are connected with the following article, and this makes him hesitant. Par. 5 reads:

> The *Evangelische Kirche der altpreussischen Union* takes her position in the one, holy, universal, Christian Church, in which the Word of God is preached in its purity and in which the sacraments are administered correctly.

In regard to this sentence Brunner asks: If the contents of paragraphs 1—4 establish the consensus, by which the unity of the *Evangelische Kirche der altpreussischen Union* is guaranteed and recognized, may one then, on the strength of pars. 1—4, conclude: here in this Church of the Union, thus defined, the Word of God is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered correctly? Brunner also wonders about par. 6 of the constitution, which reads:

> The *Evangelische Kirche der altpreussischen Union* recognizes that in the interpretation of Holy Scriptures her Lutheran, Reformed, and United *(unierte)* congregations are bound to those confessional writings of the Reformation which, according to the constitution of her member churches, are recognized as authoritative in the congregations.

Brunner declares that Article 6, following as it does Article 5, can be understood to say — actually *must* be understood to say — that the confessional writings constitute various possible interpretations of Holy Scriptures. They rank as equals among one another without disturbing the unity of the church as set forth in articles 1—4. Thereby, says Brunner — and Holstein agrees with him — a *Konsensus-Union* has replaced a union of federated churches if we view the church in its entirety *(im Blick auf die Gesamtkirche)*. To quote him: "If this is the case then the consti-

tutional article effects the most far-reaching change in the confessional status of this church since the year 1817." (P. 69)

Brunner, however, cannot and does not want to believe that this is the case. He thinks that the provision in Article 6, which specifies that according to the constitution of the member churches the confessions of each Reformation group are authoritative in the individual congregations, guarantees that a *Konsensus-Union* is not intended. He still considers the *Evangelische Kirche der altpreussischen Union* a union by federation.

Brunner's position is significant for the members of Lutheran persuasion within the present-day Church of the Union to which Brunner originally belonged. They are delighted that a union of federated churches *(gegliederte Union)* has been established. In this connection they point to the separate constitutions of the provincial or member churches. These member churches, as has been pointed out above, have now also drawn up their own constitutions as a prerogative of their legal independence. It should be mentioned at this point that at least in the eastern member churches, in contrast to the Rhenish province and to a certain extent also to Westphalia, there is a stronger confessional Lutheran stress.

This fact appears most clearly in the Pomeranian provincial or member church, which is therefore cited as an example here. In her constitution, especially in the preamble of the same, this church acknowledges the continuing authority of her confessions, naming specifically the Augsburg Confession, its Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and Luther's Small and Large Catechism (the Formula of Concord is missing). The provincial church of Pomerania furthermore identifies herself in Article 108 of her constitution as a church of the "Lutheran Confession," which (and this almost sounds apologetic) is a member of the *Altpreussische Union* on account of her history.

It is unquestionably true that progress has been made here in the awakening of a consciousness of the Lutheran Church and her confessions. In the *Unionskirche* there were formerly only individual Lutherans, or occasionally Lutheran congregations, who insisted on being called Lutheran. Today this articulation has grown. Just as the Reformed are joined together, so — as we have seen above — also a whole provincial church body can identify herself as a church of "Lutheran Confession" and refer to her confessions

without mentioning at the same time the confessional writings of the Reformed Church. All this is possible without destroying the framework of the union. For altar and pulpit fellowship between the Lutheran and the Reformed Church (that means church fellowship) is maintained as a matter of principle. Article 108 of the constitution of the Pomeranian territorial church reads: "The Provincial Church of Pomerania 'grants all members of the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (and therefore also to the Reformed) participation in the fellowship of the worship services and the sacraments.'" Nor has the acceptance of the Church of Pomerania into the Lutheran World Federation changed this situation. Referring to her joining the LWF, the Church of Pomerania states expressly: "Joining the Lutheran World Federation does not affect the membership (of the provincial Church of Pomerania) in the *Evangelische Kirche der Union.*"[4]

Surveying the whole situation, one can see that there are two different lines of development. On the one hand (according to the union's first principle, which we noted) the attempt is made to recognize more clearly the fundamentals of Christianity, that on which both confessions are in agreement, and to state them precisely. On the other hand efforts are put forth (according to the union's second principle) to take the historical confessions more seriously. One would think that this would result in conflicts within the EKU. But this is not the case because neither attempt is consistently pursued. A possible conflict is avoided by applying the union's third principle also now when, in contrast to the past, organizational articulation has progressed. All concerned, Reformed, Lutheran, and United *(Unierte)*, operate on the principle that *a difference in certain points of doctrine is no valid reason for refusing church fellowship.* This holds the church together. But thereby an actual clarification of the issues is prevented. The underlying theological question has not been solved. It is this: *Is the rejection of false doctrine of essential significance (von konstitutiver Bedeutung) for Lutherans?* It need not be pointed out here that this question is to be answered in the affirmative on the basis of Holy Scriptures and the confessions.

---

[4] This was the first time that the Lutheran World Federation recognized a member church of the union as Lutheran. What this implies for the LWF cannot be discussed here.

III

We have seen that the Prussian Union stands unchanged before us today when we examine her guiding principles. What effect does this have? What does this mean for the present situation in the church? Let us begin with a look at Germany by referring to a very recent event.

On Dec. 12, 1953, the *Evangelische Kirche der altpreussischen Union* changed her name. Par. 1 of the constitution reads: "Henceforth the *Evangelische Kirche der altpreussischen Union* shall bear the name *Evangelische Kirche der Union.* [This change in name shall not affect] her confessional principles on which she is founded."

From several quarters concern has been expressed that this change in name could mean a change in essence. The Church of the Union now lays claim, it is said, to all of Germany. This has, however, been repudiated. A leading theologian of the union, Lic. Dr. Beckmann, pointed out that only external reasons have dictated the change in name, namely, the changed political situation: the collapse of Prussia. It does not represent a movement of church politics with all of Germany as its goal. We should like to accept this explanation, particularly since Germany even now has a church structure which is based on principles so similar to the union that it is only a matter of implementing them to achieve what is intended to be achieved. This is the *Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland).*

We cannot now trace the early history and development of this church. It will suffice to point out that already after 1900 a German Evangelical Committee had been appointed which represented all German territorial churches and which after 1918 took the form of the *Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenbund.* In the year 1933 all German evangelical territorial churches were joined in a union under pressure from the state. At that time there came into existence — as we have already pointed out — the German Evangelical Church (*die Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* — DEK), dominated by the German Christians *(Deutsche Christen).*

This DEK came to an end after the political collapse of 1945. But as early as the first convocation of churches in the fall of 1945 in Treysa, a city in Hesse, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) was founded, which later expressly regarded herself as

the legal successor of the DEK. In 1948 a constitution was drawn up in Eisenach.

When we look at this constitution, we find that the principles of the Prussian Union have been more or less applied. It is on *these* principles that this constitution is based and not on Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. The latter says that for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. The constitution of the EKD, however, binds together churches of different confessions into one organizational structure, which it designates a church. The opinion evidently prevails here that all are agreed in the fundamentals.

Here we again meet the first principle that we mentioned as basic to the union endeavor. How is it formulated here? The preamble of the constitution of the EKD says: "The basis of the EKD is the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is found in the writings of the Old and the New Testament. By accepting this basis the EKD in Germany confesses the Lord of the one, universal, and apostolic church."

The similarity of this preamble with that of the church of the Prussian Union of 1922 is striking. The preamble is supplemented by Article 1, Section 2, of the constitution, which reads:

> In the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) the existing fellowship of evangelical Christendom in Germany becomes visible. With her member churches the EKD sanctions the decisions which were made by the first confessional synod *(Bekenntnissynode)* in Barmen. She recognizes her obligation as a confessing church to put into effect the insights gained in the struggle of the church *(Kirchenkampf)* regarding the essence, commission, and order of the church. She calls on the member churches to listen to the witness of the brethren. She helps them, where it is requested, in a common defense against errors, which destroy the church.

The consciousness of agreement in the fundamentals has reached the point that the membership unhesitatingly is called a *church* and is assigned duties of the *church*. For joint confession and joint defense against error — that is the function of a *church* which is one in faith.

Over against this, however, we find, as also in the Prussian Union, the second principle of union which wants to preserve (by stressing its federated character) the authority of the historical confessions.

The preamble already states: "For the confession of Holy Scriptures as well as for the confessions of the ancient church, those confessional writings of the Reformation are authoritative for the Lutheran, Reformed, and United *(unierte)* member churches and congregations as are recognized as authoritative for them." Article 1, Section 1, of the constitution states: "The EKD is a federation of Lutheran, Reformed, and United *(unierte)* churches. She respects the confessional foundation of her member churches and congregations and takes for granted that they make their confessions effective in the doctrine, life, and order of the church."

If one compares this statement with the previous one, one recognizes the strong tensions which exist in the EKD and which constantly threaten her existence. Is it a church or is it a federation? Are these principles contradictory, or can they be reconciled? Without question the latter is not the case. Here we are not dealing with a genuine and fruitful polarity but with a problematical situation which contains contradictory elements, just as was the case in the Prussian union of 1817.

Yet something more has to be said: The EKD most probably could not have come into existence, and would not be able to exist, if there had not somehow been applied the third principle of the union, which says the doctrines of the various confessions are not church divisive.

How, constitutionally speaking, does this principle assert itself? In 1947 it was almost fully put into practice. The second synod at Treysa, which was to prepare the constitution of the EKD in its final form, declared at that time with reference to altar fellowship: "It is agreed that evangelical members of congregations are not to be excluded from the celebration of the Lord's Supper because they belong to another confession which is recognized in the EKD."

This sentence establishes church fellowship among the churches represented within the EKD, since altar fellowship has always correctly been considered a significant mark of church fellowship. The confessional-minded Lutherans in the Lutheran territorial churches objected to this. One of them, Professor Elert in Erlangen, who had come from the Old Lutheran Church, drafted a sharp critique (*Promemoria of the Interim of Treysa,* June 5—6, 1947).

The result of these objections was that in 1948 a compromise

was adopted at a constitutional meeting in Eisenach. In regard to church fellowship (pulpit and altar fellowship) we read in Article 4, 2, of the constitution: "Called servants of the Word are not refused the preaching of the Gospel *(Dienst der Verkündigung)* also in congregations of other confessions within the framework of the accepted provisions of the member churches."

In this sentence reference is made to "the accepted provisions of the member churches." What does this mean? In the Lutheran territorial church of Bavaria it means, for instance, that the permission of the *Dekan* has to be obtained before another minister can occupy the pulpit. This is to be the case also in the future. But in the framework of these provisions a Reformed minister may be granted the privilege of occupying a Lutheran pulpit and vice versa. Thereby a pulpit fellowship is established which until then had not legally existed in Germany, but which had actually been practiced for some time.

And how about the second essential factor of church fellowship, namely, altar fellowship? We read in par. 4, 4, of the constitution:

> There is no full agreement within the EKD regarding admission to the Lord's Table. In many member churches those who belong to another confession, which however is recognized as valid in the EKD, are admitted to the Lord's Supper without restriction. No member church will refuse Communion to the persons of another confession, which, however, is recognized as valid in the EKD, whenever pastoral responsibility and congregational conditions demand admission.

It has been pointed out repeatedly that this formulation was not intended to establish a new regulation, but merely to describe existing conditions in the EKD. And what are these conditions? Close Communion is hardly practiced at all any more in Germany. Announcement or registration for Communion is practiced in only a few congregations. Open Communion is the rule. The admission of the heterodox to the Sacrament of the Altar is practiced almost everywhere, based on a misconception of pastoral responsibility or on grounds of congregational conditions. This is the present situation. If this condition — as is done here — is now incorporated into the constitution of the church, this can only mean that this condition is being accepted, yes, it is being legalized. At any rate those who adhere to unionistic practices can appeal to the constitution and find their actions covered.

To summarize: All provisions of Article 4 of the constitution offer the possibility of practicing church fellowship in the EKD in the sense of pulpit and altar fellowship. The Evangelical Church of the Union as a politically strong church group in the EKD will put forth efforts to preserve this state of affairs in the future. She will also make sustained efforts to strengthen her influence. By giving herself a new name in 1953, which has freed her from all former territorial connections, she thereby provides all other union churches *(Unionskirchen)* in Germany an opportunity to combine with her into a strong and militant group of organic solidarity *(in organischer Einheit)*, in order to fashion the EKD into what according to her name she already is, namely, a *church.*

For the same reason she will furthermore endeavor to blunt the doctrinal differences which exist between the two confessions. Special concern centers in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, which we wish to discuss briefly at the close of this section.

The churches assembled at Treysa II in 1947 resolved to initiate a theological discussion concerning the doctrine of the Lord's Supper with special reference to the unity of the church. This discussion was carried on over a period of 10 years and has reached a preliminary conclusion in what are known as the Arnoldshain Theses on the Lord's Supper. No less than 19 of the 20 leading German theologians who participated have expressed their agreement with these theses. Now the churches are to take a position. The final outcome is not known yet. But everywhere the opinion is voiced even now: What the Reformers sought in vain, and what the churches tried unsuccessfully till now to achieve, has finally been accomplished! Agreement on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper has been reached! It was particularly the problem of the Lord's Supper that had most clearly revealed the fissures in the structure of the Union *(Brüchigkeit der Union)* and had always rekindled the determination of the Lutherans to renewed resistance. If this question had been solved, then the *Konsensus-Union* would have been established in an essential point. Is this the case? By no means. We cannot deal exhaustively with the Arnoldshain Theses, particularly since the debate is still in progress. Only this can now be said: *These theses are derived from (leben von) an abstraction which does not help matters.* Already the so-called Confessing Church *(Bekennende Kirche)* had in 1937

in Halle dealt with the question of the Sacrament of the Altar and had found the common ground of both confessions in the formulation: *Jesus Himself is the Gift in the Sacrament.* In the Arnoldshain Theses nothing basically new is added, for these state *Jesus lets Himself be received by us.* But whereas the theses adopted at Halle in 1937 left the mode and manner of Christ's self-offering *(Selbstdarbietung)* undetermined, the Arnoldshain Theses present a formulation that is capable of a Reformed as well as of a Lutheran interpretation, as has been demonstrated. This is enough to show that no genuine unanimity has been achieved.[5] Here an attempt becomes evident which can be observed also in other endeavors of unionism. In formulating the "fundamentals of Christianity" recourse is taken to generalities which cover up the real controversies and which can be interpreted in various ways to the satisfaction of both parties. An examination of the constitutions of the EKU of 1922 and 1951 will bear this out. But an agreement arrived at in this way is not genuine.

IV

We can say: Where the principles of the union have been applied in Germany, a real solution of the existing difficulties has not been achieved. They offer no prospect of arriving at unity in the church.

Not only do the various principles present problems in themselves, but they cannot be brought into harmony with one another. If one were to follow the one, the other poses a problem. Suppose one would succeed in formulating satisfactorily those points which are "the fundamentals of Christianity," those points "in which both confessions are in agreement" — then one could no longer hold to the authority of the existing confessions. One would have created a new confession and consequently, a new church. Conversely, if one really were to take seriously the authority of the confessions, then one would realize how questionable this assumed unity in the faith really is. One would perceive far more clearly that the differences have exclusive force, and this consequently

[5] Naturally this is not all that needs to be said about the Arnoldshain Theses. Besides their ambiguity, they contain statements which are irreconcilable with the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper, or they omit essentials. Compare the article by Paul M. Bretscher: "The Arnoldshain Theses on the Lord's Supper," *CTM*, XXX, 2 (February 1959), pp. 83—91.

would lead to a disruption of the union. In this dilemma it is only natural to find a satisfactory solution by applying the third principle of the Union and to declare the existing differences not divisive of church fellowship. This principle requires a minimum of theological thinking and decisive action by the church. At its best it permits a concept of the truth in which everyone has the right to his opinion. Only the totality of these opinions constitutes the fullness of the divine truth. But this conception of truth is completely alien to Holy Scriptures.

All of this warrants the conclusion that the principles of the Prussian Union also are of no help in promoting the cause of the ecumenical movement. As in Germany, so also in this area they are not able to supply the answer to the questions which arise. To state it in one sentence, on the one hand they seek to establish a superchurch which, on the other hand, they tear down again. Here again the easiest way out would be to take recourse to the third principle of the Union and to practice church fellowship which by common consent agrees to disagree in matters of faith. This certainly happens quite often, but it does not actually promote the cause. It does, however, mean: *The Old Prussian Union of 1817 cannot be considered a precedent that can adequately serve as a pattern for the solution of the confessional question in our day.*

In conclusion we should like to add the following remarks. As has been pointed out, those Lutherans who at the time rejected the Union in Prussia became involved in a very bitter fight. It was not till 1840, after the death of Frederick III, that toleration was accorded them in Prussia. Since then they have become an organized church, and today they are making common cause with the other two Free Churches in Germany in a determined battle against unionism. But we should not omit stating that in the embattled years of 1830—40 many of them became convinced that they should emigrate. They went to Australia or to America, where they organized Lutheran churches. In Australia the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia as well as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia is composed of these Old Lutheran immigrants. In America things took a different course. There the Prussian Lutherans at first formed the Buffalo Synod, and then in 1867 joined The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod in large numbers, strengthening the latter in her antiunion-

istic position. All these churches today face a common task as a result of their origin. They all, as it were, came as fledglings from the same nest. They were created and took shape in vehement protest against the unionistic church politics of the 19th century and its leveling-off program. They considered the principle, which Frederick William III had expressed in his royal decree, namely, that the existing doctrinal differences are not church divisive, as an attack on the Lutheran Confession. They regarded it as having exclusive meaning: the confessing of the truth necessarily also requires the refutation of error. ***This constitutes their task even today.*** May they close ranks even more in taking up this task together at a time which demands clarity and truth.

Berlin, Germany