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DOCUMENTATION

A Response to Some Critical Questions

REUBEN C. BAERWALD

(This material was presented for discussion at the Southern Illinois District Convention, Belleville, Ill., June 24—26, 1968. By resolution of that convention, it was made available to others on request. We print it in this journal, without any editorial attention, in response to numerous requests.

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INTRODUCTION

Many critical questions have been raised about Synod's New York resolution on fellowship with the American Lutheran Church (ALC). These questions challenge the reality of the doctrinal agreement and point to many problems and differences in church practice. The following material picks up many of these questions (some from a widely distributed essay, "To Join or Not to Join," by Robert Preus), and provides a positive response.

After the Southern Illinois District convention, a number of suggestions were made for revision and documentation. Most of the suggestions are covered in the notes appended to the "Response." A few revisions and additions also occur in the text—primarily the final two questions.

This material was prepared at the request of the District president and is made available by resolution of the convention.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

- Q.** Did the New York convention really mean to say that Scriptural and confessional basis for pulpit and altar fellowship with the ALC "exists"?
- A.** Yes. Numerous attempts to weaken the resolution at this point with amendments failed by overwhelming votes. The final vote on the resolution (3-23) was almost unanimous. The convention minutes indicate that there were less than 10 dissenting votes.
- Q.** But how can the New York convention say a consensus exists in our understanding and proclamation of the Gospel when we obviously have differences on questions concerning the Holy Scriptures and lodge membership?
- A.** The New York convention proceeded on the basis of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, which says: "For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word." The convention also was mindful of Dr. C. F. W. Walther's Altenburg Thesis 8: "The orthodox church is to be judged principally by the common, orthodox, and public confession to which the members acknowledge themselves to have been pledged and which they profess."

With these principles in mind, the convention noted:

- a. the Constitution of the ALC and its publicly stated doctrinal basis,
- b. the essays on Scripture, Grace, the Church, produced by the ALC and LCMS commissioners, demonstrating a common understanding of the Gospel and its related doctrines as set forth in the Lutheran Confessions,
- c. the *Joint Statement and Declaration* of the commissioners stating a consensus,
- d. the recommendation of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, concurring in the consensus,

and voted that a true Scriptural and confessional basis exists.

The convention recognized — as did the commissioners — that many unresolved issues remained. But these involved either matters not on the level of articles of faith or diversities in practice "which do not constitute a denial or contradiction of the Gospel."

In this way the convention carefully distinguished between those issues which are of a confessional nature and articles of faith and such issues which are not divisive of church fellowship and can more easily be resolved when "Christians are united in the work of the Lord under the Word and sacraments."

- Q. Shouldn't we wait until we have settled our problems with the ALC before declaring fellowship? Wouldn't that provide a stronger foundation?
- A. Such complete unanimity would indeed be a blessing. But the question assumes that we have the privilege of withholding pulpit and altar fellowship even when we have reached the kind of doctrinal unity the Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions require. It would indeed eliminate some burdens and problems if we waited, but the Scriptures do not give us the option of postponing fellowship for our convenience when we find those who are one in Christ, one in a pure understanding of the Gospel and one in the administration of the sacraments. It is a sin against the body of Christ to refuse fellowship to such brethren.¹
- Further, it should be noted that our past practice also contradicts such a procedure. During the many years in which we were in pulpit and altar fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod, we had not resolved our differences on the church, the ministry, chaplains in the armed services, membership in the Boy Scouts of America. And finally, we do not have such resolution of problems and practices even within our own LCMS. Yet we continue in pulpit and altar fellowship while at the same time we admonish one another and try to reach greater unity.
- Q. Do we know that the old doctrinal questions on conversion, election, synergism have been resolved?
- A. Yes. The official doctrinal platform of the ALC clearly spells out the orthodox Lu-

¹ Compare the many doctrinal and practical problems in the church at Corinth and the churches in Galatia. Compare also Acts 15. It is instructive, furthermore, to remember that Article VII of the Augsburg Confession was speaking of the relationship between Lutherans and Roman Catholics.

theran position on these matters.² Further, the essays on Scripture, grace, the church, produced by the commissioners, clearly state in Biblical terms a common agreement on these confessional articles.

Q. Why are we now in such a hurry to establish fellowship? Many of the areas of our LCMS do not seem to feel the same consensus with the ALC which Synod expressed.

A. It is not really such a hasty matter. We have been talking with the ALC for over 40 years.³ During that time we have been to the point of fellowship three times. Each time we had reached doctrinal consensus, but our relationship with the Wisconsin Synod and the ALC relationship with the old American Lutheran Conference and recently the merger into the American Lutheran Church intervened to postpone actual declaration.

Areas which feel greater difficulty should move more quickly to discussions with the local members of the ALC and perhaps more slowly in practice of fellowship. But they must seriously ask whether their problem should hold back the millions of members of both bodies who now rejoice in the possibility of fellowship.

Q. Aren't we just following the ecumenical spirit so prominent in American churches today?

A. No. Many of the ecumenical unity efforts deliberately leave bothersome questions, especially doctrinal questions, unanswered. We, as Lutherans, have consistently insisted on doctrinal agreement before fellowship. It is the conviction of our church (New York Resolution 3-23) that such doctrinal agreement has been achieved under the blessing of God. (Cf. question 2)

Q. What about the ALC relationships with LWF, WCC, and the LCA?

² *Minneapolis Thesis*, Article IV (Points of Doctrine), 6—8: "Faith is not in any measure a human effort. Faith is an act of man in so far as it is man who believes. But both the power to believe and the act of believing are God's work and gift in the human soul or heart."

"Conversion as the word is commonly used in our Lutheran confession comprises contrition and faith produced by the Law and Gospel. If man is not converted, the responsibility and guilt fall on him . . . If a man is converted the glory belongs to God alone, whose work it is throughout. Before conversion or in conversion, there is no cooperation of man, but at the very moment man is converted cooperation begins through the new powers given in conversion. . . ."

"The causes of election to salvation are the mercy of God and the most holy merit of Christ; nothing in us on account of which God has elected us to eternal life."

Essay on "Sola Gratia" adopted by the Commissioners of the ALC and LCMS: "Justification is by grace (Rom. 3:24; Titus 3:7); salvation is by grace, by grace alone without any contribution of man (Acts 15:11; Eph. 2:5; 2 Tim. 2:9; Titus 2:11)." (Part I: The God of All Grace)

"The Gospel is the unconditional promise and proffer of grace in Christ Jesus, to be received in the beggary of faith. Faith, too, is the creation and the gift of God. The grace of God is therefore called into question when faith, or its fruits, is thought of as supplementary, or contributing to, the free grace of God who justifies the ungodly." (Part III: The People of Grace: Antitheses)

³ Technically, this refers only to the old American Lutheran Church. We have been talking with the entire present ALC for over 7 years in accordance with the authorization of the San Francisco convention in 1959.

A. It is true, the ALC belongs to LWF and WCC. Pulpit and altar fellowship with LCA is also under consideration.

However, the *Joint Statement and Declaration* of the commissioners accepted by both the CTCR and the New York synod says: "Diversity, such as participation or non-participation in certain interchurch agencies and enterprises, may exist without disrupting fellowship among our churches, provided that such participation or non-participation does not constitute a denial or contradiction of the Gospel."⁴

At the Detroit convention we also dealt with this kind of problem. We said there that our daughter churches in foreign fields could responsibly enter into fellowship with other Lutheran churches even if they were daughters of American Lutheran churches with whom the LCMS was not in fellowship.⁵

In other words, we must respect the ALC to act responsibly even when we are not ready in matters of this kind. The *ALC Articles of Union* clearly state: "Church fellowship . . . presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel. . . . Where the establishment and maintenance of church fellowship ignores present doctrinal differences or declares them a matter of indifference, there is unionism—pretense of union which does not exist."

Q. Don't the disadvantages of fellowship outweigh the advantages? Will we really benefit?

A. Fellowship is a gift of God and not a question of advantage or benefit. Pulpit and altar fellowship is a good in itself, a necessary demonstration of our oneness in Christ, when the Holy Spirit has blessed us with such unity in all articles of faith.

Q. How does the ALC stand on the doctrine of Scripture?

A. The *United Testimony*, Art. III, states: "We bear witness that the Bible is our only authentic and infallible source of God's revelation to us and all men, and that it is the only inerrant and completely adequate source and norm of Christian doctrine and life. We hold that the Bible, as a whole, and in all its parts, is the Word of God under all circumstances regardless of man's attitude toward it."

Q. But what about some of the teachers in the ALC schools who have made statements about verbal inspiration and inerrancy which seem to contradict the official position of the ALC?

A. This is an important and difficult question. It must be admitted that some theologians have made some startling statements. However, fellowship is established on the basis of a church's official position and not the possibly erroneous statements of individual members.

Then too, we must remember what some of the more careful statements on inerrancy

⁴ Both the Wisconsin Synod and the LCMS maintain fellowship with various free churches in Europe. Yet the Wisconsin Synod and the LCMS are not at present in fellowship. The LCMS does not maintain that our fellowship with another church body necessarily involves us in all their associations.

⁵ Cf. Detroit convention Resolution 3-04, *Proceedings*, pp. 104—5.

are speaking *against*. They are in reaction to a dictation theory of inspiration and a type of wooden and literalistic interpretation of Scripture. Granted, our theologians will want to sit down with ALC theologians to work out better ways and less disturbing ways of getting at the problem. But we ought to be very careful about accusing these men of denying the confessional position on Scripture.

The problem of believing that the Bible is infallible and inerrant and that it will not mislead us while at the same time taking into account the actual data of the Scripture itself, including the many statements which do not yield to rational harmonization, has always posed difficulty in the church.

The Australian Lutheran Church has tried to present the matter in a most careful and responsible way: "With the whole true Church of God we confess the Bible to be the inerrant Word of God. This inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures cannot be seen with human eyes, nor can it be proved to human reason; it is an article of faith, a belief in something that is hidden and not obvious. We believe that the Scriptures are the Word of God and therefore inerrant. The term 'inerrancy' has no reference to the variant readings found in the extant textual sources because of copyists' errors or deliberate alterations; neither does it imply an absolute verbal accuracy in quotations and in parallel accounts, such absolute uniformity evidently not having been part of God's design. We believe that the holy writers, whom God used, retained the distinctive features of their personalities (language and terminology, literary methods, conditions of life, knowledge of nature and history as apart from direct revelation and prophecy). God made use of them in such a manner that even that which human reason might call a deficiency in Holy Scripture must serve the divine purpose."

Even such a conservative commentator as P. E. Kretzmann when considering Matthew 1 in his *Popular Commentary* admits the difficulty in the harmonization of the genealogy given there and the listing in 2 Chron. 22-26: "A careful comparison of the list as here given and the account found in the Old Testament, 2 Chron. 22-26, shows a slight discrepancy, since Ahaziah, Joash, and Amaziah followed after Joram, before Uzziah. The explanation for this difficulty is found in the fact that Matthew took up the genealogies just as he found them in the public Jewish repositories, which, though in the main parts correct, were yet deficient in some respects."

Such instances can be multiplied where attempts at rational harmonization do not seem to yield satisfactory answers. Whenever the term inerrancy is used in a way that such problems are ignored, many Biblical scholars react negatively. It is in this light that we ought to examine the quotations from ALC scholars.

That there are serious difficulties here cannot be denied. But these are kinds of problems which can best be discussed and resolved within the context of fellowship. At any rate, neither the validity nor the binding force of the ALC's constitutional article on Holy Scripture is being called into question. And it is on the basis of this public and official position that we must deal with the ALC.

Q. What is the position of the ALC on the lodge question?

A. The *Minneapolis Thesis*, Article V, states: "These synods agree that all such organizations or societies, secret or open, as are either avowedly religious or practice the forms of religion without confessing as a matter of principle the Triune God or Jesus Christ as the Son of God, come into the flesh, and our Savior from sin; or teach, instead of the Gospel, salvation by human works or morality, are anti-Christian and destructive of the best interests of the Church and the individual soul, and that, therefore, the Church of Christ and its congregations can have no fellowship with them."

We are therefore in agreement on the doctrinal issues involved. There is however a difference in practice. "The customary practice of the ALC is to admit lodge members to church membership and then to use the Gospel power to show them that their lodge membership is a denial of their Christian faith. Our customary practice is to require the lodge member to make a decision before he joins the church. The ALC believes its approach is more evangelical. We believe that our approach is more practical and honest. The difference in practice, while it does cause problems, does not militate against the Gospel and so does not impair the true unity of the Church." (From a statement used in discussion in the Southeastern District)

In considering this difference in practice two further items must be noted: One is that many of our churches in effect practice in accord with the ALC position. The quick assumption is that these churches are guilty of "loose lodge practice." But what if they are convinced that such practice is more evangelical and more effective? The point is that our church has historically had a dissenting minority opinion on this matter without destroying fellowship. Divergence in practice has been cause for study, counsel, and discussion, but it has not been considered divisive or an article of faith.

The other item to note is that the present ALC practice has rather impressive historical support in our church.⁶ Dr. C. F. W. Walther on Aug. 16, 1864, wrote a letter which states:

"My dear Brother: I must acknowledge a hesitancy in writing this reply to your letter. The cause of it is this: my conviction in this question differs from that of men in our Synod, whom I esteem highly. If it were regarding a clear doctrine, this

⁶ Cf. John Constable, "Lodge Practice Within the Missouri Synod," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXXIX (July—August 1968), 476—96. After surveying the evidence from LCMS literature and official convention proceedings, Dr. Constable makes some valuable observations. Two such observations help to summarize the historical evidence: The "Missouri Synod has always officially opposed lodges on a doctrinal basis because of their antichristian religious teachings. . . . In the question of how one deals with such groups, there has been a noticeable lack of agreement within Synod. In addition, it is evident that there has never been complete uniformity of practice within the Synod" (p. 495). "Thus there is ample evidence of a continuing evangelical concern despite almost cyclical efforts to legislate a single, firm practice, and there is ample evidence of the Synod's refusal to make lodge practice a doctrinal matter" (p. 495).

would not cause me to have any misgivings. . . . Here, however, no doctrine is involved (since we perfectly agree in our opinion regarding secret orders according to God's Word), but what is involved is a practical application of this doctrine in a concrete use. Here I proceed from the principle that whomever I cannot prove to be an unbeliever and who confesses my faith, I will not refuse communion nor membership in the congregation even if he still is living in some sins of ignorance or weakness. Whom could I admit to communion if that were a reason for refusal? When it is certain that Christ has accepted someone, who am I to reject him? If I make an exception in the case of secret orders, I lose the sure foothold of principle on which I otherwise receive persons into membership. Of course, I would point out to such a candidate for congregational membership his incorrect relation (*unrichtiges Verhältnis*) and try to persuade him that he try to give it up; if it should become clear that I cannot convince him, I should regard it as my duty to receive him nevertheless as a weak Christian, but with a protest against his connection and with the explanation that I am acting in the hope that he would understand the matter as soon as he has learned to know the Word of God more thoroughly. When a congregation has the condition in its constitution that no member of a secret order may become a member of that congregation, I consider this a mistake and very harmful especially in this neighborhood in which lodges are prevailing. . . ." The 11th convention of Synod⁷ dealt with a request from the Eastern District, asking whether a congregation containing one-third lodge members could be received into Synod. The reply indicates that no agreement was reached, but "we should not permit ourselves to be discouraged too much because we could not come to any agreement in this matter. For the matter in question is *not a point of doctrine*; we are in full agreement in doctrine on this particular article; but we are dealing with a specific case in casuistry. . . . It is understood among us as a self-evident matter that members of secret societies whom we find in our congregations or who attend our churches are to be borne with great love and patience, also not to be turned away from the Lord's Supper as long as they still are open to instruction."

- Q. But shouldn't we wait in declaring fellowship until we reach agreement in lodge practice because it is such a burning issue in some Districts?
- A. The presence of difficulties and many problems of long standing in some areas cannot be denied. But these problems are matters of practice and at times neglect of brotherly discussion. Such practical problems do not involve articles of faith. Neither divergence in practice nor our convenience are sufficient reason for denying a God-pleasing demonstration of fellowship and unity in the Gospel.
- Q. If fellowship is declared, would this mean that LCMS churches would be obligated to accept into membership by transfer ALC lodge members?

⁷ LCMS *Proceedings*, XI (1863), 60 ff.

- A. No. This is not obligatory even within the LCMS. Fellowship would not mean that LCMS congregations must give up their convictions or practice.⁸ It should also be remembered that only some ALC members are lodge members. Only a small minority are involved. We are dealing with several million communicants.
- Q. Would LCMS congregations have to commune ALC lodge members if fellowship is declared?
- A. The answer is similar to the previous one. However, Synod's *Handbook*, 14.07g, provides for exceptional cases. "A pastor will sometimes encounter exceptional cases in which he is called upon to administer Holy Communion to a person who is still outwardly connected with such a lodge." Ultimately, this remains a matter of pastoral care, not a simple application of rules.⁹
- Q. Isn't it true that the ALC has fine statements about lodge, but they do not put them into practice?
- A. This is a dangerous statement. It may be true of some congregations. But that would be the case in the LCMS also. The LCMS practice is more visible. The ALC practice is pastoral and private. Who really knows how faithfully pastors carry out their pastoral obligations in all matters in either LCMS or ALC? We must learn to trust one another in our callings and forgive one another in our weakness and failure. An observer of the Lutheran scene for many years has observed that neither practice has been entirely successful. We in the LCMS have perhaps kept more lodge members out of the church and therefore have fewer lodge members percentage-wise. The ALC may have a few more lodge members but may have gotten more people out of the lodge.

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⁸ It is self-evident that congregations would nevertheless assume responsibility for a ministry to such people.

⁹ Cf. the report of Synod's Lodge Bureau to the 1938 synod speaking against "a legalistic, mechanical operation with lodge resolutions, paragraphs, and principles." Cited by Constable in the *CTM* article, note 6 above.