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Rejoicing in Mercy: Unity in Diversity

John W. Constable

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The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has adopted an apt slogan to celebrate a century and a quarter of its existence: "Rejoicing in Mercy." The Lord has been good to our beloved Synod and has given us so much. A quarter of a century ago we celebrated "A Century of Grace;"¹ a half-century ago we cried "Ebenezer"—"the Lord hath helped us hitherto."²

Our fathers remembered that the blessings were undeserved. Unity in the faith was a gift of God's good spirit; we sought uniformity in expression and practice—at least the highest possible degree of uniformity.

The fathers recognized the difference between God's gift of unity in faith and uniformity in other areas already in the 1854 constitution of Synod:

Reasons for Establishing a Synod

4. The conservation and promoting of the unity of the pure confession and the common defense against schism and sectarianism.
6. The establishment of the largest possible uniformity in church government.

C. F. W. Walther and others made this same distinction a century ago when they formed the Synodical Conference:

Article 4. Purpose

... to give outward expression to the unity of spirit existing among the con-

¹ See Walter A. Baepler, *A Century of Grace: A History of the Missouri Synod, 1847 to 1947* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1947).

² See W. H. T. Dau, *Ebenezer: Reviews of the Work of the Missouri Synod during Three Quarters of a Century* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1927).

stituent synods; to encourage and strengthen one another in faith and confession; to further unity in doctrine and practice and to remove whatever might threaten to disturb this unity; . . .

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been characterized by a high degree of uniformity, a degree perhaps envied by other American churches. However, it has not been complete uniformity. Synodical leaders always sought for a higher degree of uniformity at both the intra- and inter-synodical levels. Because of our unity in the Lord Jesus Christ given by the free gift of the Spirit and confessed in Article II of our Synod's constitution, we should raise our voices in thanksgiving for the degree of uniformity He has given.

SIGNS OF OUR UNITY

By the Spirit of God we have been given the gift of the inspired Scriptures. Within our Synod a sign of our unity has always been this loyalty to the Scriptures. It has always been a unifying core of our entire synodical life. But our unity is in a sense not based on Scripture for it came to us when we were baptized in the name of Christ before we were conscious of a written Scripture. Our sacramental unity began from the time we were "born again by water and the Spirit." We affirm with Paul, "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ . . . for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:26-28)

Baptism is the point at which all of us were made one in Christ in the

unity of the faith. We daily rejoice in this mercy of God as "daily a new man comes forth." Should one not remind himself as does our Catechism that "in Baptism the Holy Ghost works faith and thus creates in us new spiritual life"? and that "we should renew our baptismal vow daily"?

The Lord's Supper is a continual source of renewal and a powerful reminder of the unity in faith that God has given and sustains. It is strange how infrequently this subject has been discussed by our church in our synodical conventions. Many recognize the Sacrament in only an oblique fashion. If one does not wish to have anything to do with another person, he withdraws himself from this blessing or withholds it from another who might be weak and in need of this blessed assurance. It has more often become a weapon against a brother than a source or sign of the unity we have in Jesus Christ. To be concerned about worthiness rather than fellowship is to forget Luther's "He is worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, 'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.'"

We have permitted our sacramental usage to become attuned to the American scene, and our ideas relative to the Supper have sometimes been shaped by the theology about us. Congregational participation has been limited, and we show practices that have been colored by our existence as a frontier church (celebrated once a month, attendance restricted to four times a year). This sacrament of unity is God's gift to his church. It should be the center of congregational unity and the springboard to our search for external unity and uniformity. Is it true that we pastors have found such a weak significance in this gift of God that we have communicated it to our people? Any unity worth talking about must be found in a sacramental expression.

CONFESSIONAL LOYALTY

We are a confessional movement within Christianity. We have been serious about this since the time the forefathers of our Synod left Germany and came here as "Old" or "Confessional" Lutherans. While the Confessions are a unifying factor, many confess themselves to be ignorant of their contents. Pastors often say, "I'm no theologian, but. . . ." There is almost total ignorance on the part of our laity. The Confessions have sometimes been used as an instrument to browbeat rather than to unite. On the other hand, some seem to say that they subscribe only to portions of the Confessions because much of these writings relate only to 16th-century Germany. It is not sufficient to say that the Confessions are only culturally and historically significant. For a Lutheran Christian they are more. Our loyalty to them and our expression of that trust in them in our ordination vows are taken seriously.

Dr. Walther was a master of the Confessions, and in the free conferences of the mid 1850s he used them to establish fellowship with other American Lutherans. He did not insist that full agreement on every issue must be established for fellowship with others (see Indianapolis Synod in 1849 and Synodical Conference in 1872). He was sure that honest discussion would bring about a greater degree of uniformity both in faith and practice.

Our unity of faith under the Confessions has been of value to other Lutherans in the United States. Through the Synodical Conference, many synods learned from Missouri. It is easy to catalog the growth of the Synod as other synods moved into its orbit—Michigan, Illinois, English, National Evangelical Lutheran Church (Finnish), Slovak, and others.

As confessionalism became strong in Missouri and spread through the

influence of *Der Lutheraner*, it both helped and was helped by the revival of interest that was going on in other synods of American Lutheranism in the mid-19th century. In every Lutheran merger or declaration of fellowship that has come into existence since 1867, the matter of confessional Lutheran theology has played an increasingly major role. Even a cursory examination of the articles of faith of modern Lutheran churches will confirm this revival.³

LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

In its first 75 years, our Synod had an extensive linguistic uniformity. While some might consider this a cultural lag, older clergy tell both how meaningful it was and how it tended to bring the Synod into closer agreement. It is to be deplored that the great treasures of our early synodical fathers are locked out for this current generation because the use of German has declined.⁴

A case could also be made for the fact that a great deal of our uniformity under a common language began to erode when we were forced by World War I to turn to English. Some argue that our theological heritage began to shrink when we lost the German. The cultural shock that accompanied the language transition left a deep mark on the Synod. Most of the theological materials that were available in English were Reformed rather than Lutheran. In recent years, we have learned to distinguish between confessional Lutheran principles and the theological ideas that many of us

borrowed from these good, but non-Lutheran books.

Students at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in the 1940s bought Reformed theology from both the libraries of deceased pastors and over the counter at the Book Store. It was then that I purchased my shelf of sermons by Spurgeon and Torrey, Trench on the miracles and parables, and a full set of "The Fundamentals." Many students bought commentaries by Jamison, Fausett and Brown; Matthew Henry; or *The Pulpit Commentary*.

There was an unconscious reductionism going on in this period that has risen to haunt us today. Much of our theology had been graced with the label "uniform." The 1930s was a period of stagnation for our Synod, partly due to the Great Depression and partly due to the stereotyped phraseology we had learned from some of these non-Lutheran texts. The uniformity we claimed was hard on us, but we thought we all said the same things. Humanly speaking, the only things that saved us for the future were World War II, which caused us to look again at the rapidly changing world, and the fact that we could point with pride to the work of our Synod in new ventures such as the radio mass media, hospital and military chaplains, and new foreign missions in the post-war world. We were ripe for some kind of renaissance, and it came in the form of a renewed interest in the Confessions, Luther, and, above all, in Biblical studies. Here were the roots of Lutheran theology, and in the 1950s this interest led us into a deeper understanding of God's mercy toward us.

³ Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

⁴ The late Carl S. Meyer had begun to make Walther's letters available in English. See *Letters of C. F. W. Walther: A Selection* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969). A second selection has just recently been published; *Walther Speaks to the Church: Selected Letters* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973).

EDUCATION

From a practical point of view we affirm that a great deal of our uniformity often stemmed from our educational system. While we were still rural and Germanic, the parochial school system communicated both a

theology and a heritage that made for a high degree of uniformity within the Synod. With modern mobility we no longer educate many people "from the cradle to the grave." The rural church that we once knew will never be recaptured, but it surely served us well by the mercy of God.

Within both the ministerial and teacher programs we early developed a system that was almost without equal in American Protestantism. The "system," despite all the bad things one can remember about it, produced an educational program that molded men in a similar image. The Second World War with its need to get more clergy and teachers into the church caused many changes within the system and significantly decreased the uniformity. After 1945 we discovered and cultivated new educational techniques for both clergy and teachers. In point of fact, we began a process of rapid "Americanization." Our schools conformed to the American pattern, and we added years to both areas of training in order to satisfy varied educational requirements.

More and more students were married, in contrast to our earlier view which had dropped those unwilling to wait until after graduation. Now, however, the majority of our students are married, and this has broken down the previous uniformity. Fewer students today make up their minds for either the ministry or teaching profession as early as formerly. Many no longer are products of the "system," but decide their life's profession later.

These factors have affected our uniformity. They have also been partly responsible for the failure of trust in our church today. A uniform system of education had produced for our Synod men who were loyal to one another and who also trusted each other.

We knew each other, probably at times too well! Men had been students of Walther and Francis Pieper and were proud of it. At circuit,

District, and synodical meetings there was an air of fraternity not to be found anywhere else. With the same kind of school backgrounds and loyalties, we knew and trusted one another.

It was the same for the faculty. We trusted our teachers and could ask them for a *Gutachten* on some perplexing question. Often such problems arose because we did not get the help we needed in our seminary days from our terribly overworked professors.⁵

In the 1930s changes were taking place within the faculty at Concordia, St. Louis. Faculty men such as Theodore Graebner and William Arndt clearly changed their views on fellowship with other Lutherans, mainly because of personal contacts with them.

At the 1938 synodical meeting in St. Louis, Dr. Walter A. Maier Sr., in an impassioned speech, exhorted the Synod to vote to declare fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. Members of the faculty joined in support of this resolution. Many pastors believed themselves betrayed by their faculty, for many faculty men had taught them to oppose fellowship. Partisanship began to rise and to find adherents. The war of printed words began, and it became "open season" to attack a brother without qualms.⁶

Uniformity was badly battered in the Synod, but what was happening with respect to the unity that God had given through His Spirit? The question not faced was, "Could we still rejoice in the mercy of God who had given us true unity in Christ and pos-

⁵ Theodore Graebner, "For a Penitent Jubilee," in *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* XLV, 1 (February 1972), 3-4. Here is recorded the toll that the church took on the minds and bodies of its professors in the period 1900-1920. Early deaths, breakdowns, and physical ailments were the general rule.

⁶ Theodore Graebner, "The Cloak of the Cleric," in *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* XLIV, 1 (February 1971), 3-12, illustrates the manner in which faculty and others were attacked as some felt that this could be done while maintaining some type of "clerical immunity."

sibly in that same mercy was opening us up in our relations with our fellow Lutheran Christians?"

The polarization process had already begun, and it continued as Synod argued about the Adolf Brux case⁷ and chose up sides over the "44."⁸ People constantly reminded us that we were no longer one because they mistook uniformity for unity.

Our Synod also showed a deep interest in the physical needs of society. The rise of the hospital movement, the concern for widows and orphans and those in need in the cities promoted all kinds of programs from slum missions to homes for the aged. Uniform was our concern for those in need, and we can rejoice with thanksgiving that our fathers led us to such a concern for people. This pioneer work deserves a strong word of praise as we ministered to the "whole man."

DIVERSITY

In our Synod's search for uniformity we have often neglected the human element in its historical setting. The church is a human instrument; men are different, and their ideas are diverse. The Word of God itself shows diversity as in Heb. 1:1—"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." Even the inspired writers of the gospels were four in number, and we are aware of their varied emphases. Whenever anyone attempted to bring uniformity into their witness, the church rebelled as in the case of Tatian's attempt to pool four gospels into one.

The Lutherans who met in Chicago 125 years ago were men who had ex-

perienced a very complex and diverse European church with all its different theological emphases. They came from Saxony, Franconia, and Pomerania. The Saxons tried to rally around a bishop for a short time and then opted for congregational supremacy. Not all of them wanted such freedom within the Synod, and a controversy developed over the issues of church and ministry which caused some to turn elsewhere.

As Missouri reached out into the American scene, she soon found friends among the Norwegians. For a number of years the Norwegian Synod trained their students at Concordia in St. Louis until in 1881 a difference in theological stance caused some to turn elsewhere for their fellowship.

One of the curious ententes of Missouri was its relationship to the Wisconsin Synod. This group had been formed in 1850 and had trouble with their Lutheran consciousness. They attacked the position of the Missouri Synod and even communed members of the Reformed church. Yet in the year 1872 they joined the Synodical Conference and agreed to work toward "further unity in doctrine and practice." Missouri proved it could incorporate diversity into its midst.

The first leaders of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod reflected a surprising amount of diversity. Walther changed his views about having a bishop. Wyneken served a congregation in Fort Wayne which had both Lutherans and Reformed in it for a time. Sihler did not agree with Walther's view of the church. Today each pastor in the Synod finds some things which cause him to have some reservations.

The membership within our churches today is likewise of varied backgrounds. We are no longer a rural, Germanic church. When we became involved with the urban, English sprawl, we began to bring into

⁷ See F. Dean Lueking, *Mission in the Making* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964); pp. 270-76 have the story of our first missionary to the Moslems and his challenge to an interpretation of Rom. 16:17.

⁸ See C. S. Meyer, *Moving Frontiers* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), pp. 422-24.

the church more and more people who were "church shopping." More people were transfers than converts. Our attempts at retooling them for the Lutheran faith have been badly done. It is often hard for them to shed their old beliefs when we have presented the Lutheran faith "in twelve easy lessons." We have often unwittingly helped our people to develop an eclectic faith.

When our Synod was faced with questions concerning the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, some supported the idea of codifying all interpretations of the Word. In a sense, we forgot one of the cardinal principles we cited in the organization of Synod:

5. The endeavor to bring about: the largest possible uniformity in church practice, church customs, and, in general, in congregational affairs.

We assumed that this also applied to doctrine. We tended to lose the sense of this point and made efforts to impose uniformity beyond these areas and so stifle theological variety in our midst. In the long run, however, the Synod saved itself from theological death by never officially opting for one specific view or methodological approach to the inspired Word. Some confusion at this level resulted from adopting resolutions that were supposed to contain the "traditional position" when we should have allowed the Gospel and the Confessions to speak to us.

Missouri's foreign missionary has usually been a different kind of personality. His problems were different and his approaches have varied. We have learned much from our missionaries that dare not be forgotten. It is from these men that we have received a sense of mission that we did not develop on the American scene. We have learned from them the importance of ministering to the "whole man" and the "whole society."

The diversity within our Synod

shows itself in changed and changing attitudes in many practical areas. Men were hounded and persecuted for diversity on some of the issues, or else they refused to get involved with the questions. How do we feel today about usury, life and fire insurance, the stock market, lightning rods or *Schwagerebe*? The practice of the Synod has changed in the matter of divorce and remarriage. Here, too, we must confess that the influence of women within the Synod has caused us to adopt diverse positions. The members of the distaff side have not only moved from their side of the church building but have also moved into a great deal of synodical activity and leadership. This issue is related to our changing societal patterns, and we have not been able to stem the tide. Women are here to stay, and their rights will be recognized everywhere, including the church.

Variety has been the pattern also within liturgical practices these past 125 years. Many retain the frontier Geneva gown, while others, remembering the Lutheran liturgical usages (once frowned upon as "Romanizing tendencies"), turn to our rich heritage. There are few today among either the laity or clergy who blanch at a clerical collar, surplice, and stole. Such is the diversity we enjoy.

What has happened to our unity in all this diversity? Really, nothing. Do we not all confess that we are sinners? Do we not all stand before God forgiven and called by the Spirit into a unity that no man has made nor no one can take away?

What has happened to our uniformity? Have we been blind to the facts? Have we so romanticized the past that we truly believe that *all*, both pastors and teachers, said and did the same things? Dr. Pieper was perhaps more honest than we:

I confess on a number of pages that also in the Missouri Synod we have not 6

in every respect and in every place spoken correctly on Election and Conversion. I reprinted there a statement to that effect from one of our fathers. Recently, while turning the pages of old volumes of *Lehre und Wehre* I received the impression that we "Missourians" have "confessed" more than anyone else.⁹

Walther too realized his personal difficulties:

It is my continual earnest endeavor to make progress in the apprehension of the truth and with the help of God to cleanse myself more and more from all error that adheres to me.¹⁰

We have had diversity in our unity for 125 years. It is not an evil thing because humans have played a role in it. Pieper spoke to this point.

There is a domain of occasionally inexact and wrong use of language concerning which justice and charity demand that we do not press its terms unduly. Luther somewhere calls it the height of wickedness to try to make a heretic of a man because of some expressions susceptible of misinterpreta-

tion although one knows that they do not represent his real teaching. Also in the orthodox church good marksmen will not always hit the mark, but in carelessness or haste will aim too high or too low. It has always been thus, it is that way now, and will remain so to Judgment Day.¹¹

Dr. Walther in the last years of his life (1868) gave us good counsel.

Patience, gentleness, mutual fraternal esteem, frank exchange of the conflicts of either side, close study of Scripture, constant prayer, will be the necessary weapons for those who wish to attain the agreement for which we long and to frustrate the schemes of the devil.¹²

To rejoice as we should in this anniversary year we must take cognizance of the mercy of God toward our Synod. God has taken men of the faith given to them and used humans—frail and diverse as they are—to establish a church under grace. Rejoice always in this mercy!

St. Louis, Mo.

⁹ *Zur Einigung* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1913), pp. 89-100.

¹⁰ *Der Lutheraner*, XIII, p. 1.

¹¹ Franz Pieper, *Zur Einigung*, op. cit.

¹² Letter in files of Theodore Graebner, Box 118, file 9.