

Toward Cooperation Among American Lutherans

by Heinrich J. Vogel

In 1958 the National Lutheran Council extended an invitation to the non-participating Lutheran church bodies in the U.S.A. to examine the whole question of cooperative activities in American Lutheranism. This invitation was accepted by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with the understanding that the theological implications of Christian cooperation would be considered in the discussions. As background for such an examination, it was deemed wise by both bodies to conduct a series of meetings at which some of the fundamental theological issues relevant to any kind of cooperation might be discussed. Accordingly three meetings have been held.

The first meeting took place in Chicago, Illinois, on July 7–9, 1960, and concerned itself with the meaning of the term “doctrine of the Gospel,” in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. Two essays were read, both entitled *A Lutheran Study of Church Unity*, one written by Dr. Conrad Bergendoff, President of Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, and the other by Dr. Martin H. Franzmann, Professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.

The second meeting was held in St. Louis, Missouri, on November 18–19, 1960. Again two essays were read which dealt this time with the meaning of subscription to the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. One of these by Dr. Theodore G. Tappert, Professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, bore the title *The Significance of Confessional Subscription*, and the other by Dr. Herbert J. A. Bouman, Professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, was entitled *In Nomine Jesu, Thoughts on the Significance of Confessional Subscription*.

A third meeting held in Chicago, Illinois, October 31 and November 1, 1961, focused its attention on the question, “What kind of Cooperation is Possible, in View of the Discussion to Date?” Again two essays were heard. One written by Dr. Alvin N. Rogness, President of Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, was read in his absence by Dr. Warren Quanbeck, Professor of Systematic Theology, Luther Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. The other was written and read by Dr. Martin H. Franzmann, Professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. Both bore the title: *What Kind of Cooperation is Possible, in View of the Discussions to Date?*

Twenty-three men represented the various church bodies affiliated with the National Lutheran Council, and sixteen men represented the Committee on Doctrinal Unity and the Praesidium of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod at these meetings. In May, 1961, the first four of the essays, and in November, 1961, the two remaining essays were published jointly by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council, and a copy of each was sent to every pastor and professor in the Synodical Conference and in the National Lutheran Council to afford an opportunity for the study of these documents.

According to the report of the Committee on Doctrinal Unity in the Reports and Memorials for the 45th Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, pp. 145–146, “In the course of these face-to-face discussions the participants came to rejoice and thank God for the degree of consensus evident in the fundamentals of Lutheran confessional theology, as well as the willingness on all sides to engage in serious doctrinal conversations. The appended statement sets forth the results of our meetings and the future prospects for a new association of Lutheran Churches in America. The structure of this projected new agency should be studied to note its carefully circumscribed character and scope. A realistic assessment of both opportunities and the unresolved problems should prevent the extremes of an irresponsible optimism and an equally irresponsible pessimism.”

The Committee on Doctrinal Unity of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod then presents a resolution to offer at the 45th Convention of the Synod at Cleveland, Ohio, June 20–30, 1962, urging the formation of a new inter-Lutheran agency to replace the former National Lutheran Council. The text of the resolution follows:

Proposed Resolution for Convention from NLC and Missouri Synod

That, contingent upon like action by The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church in America, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod—

- I. Records itself as favoring the formation of an inclusive inter-Lutheran agency in the United States of America whose scope and functions are described in general as follows:
 1. All Lutheran church bodies in the United States are to be invited to participate in the planning and formation of the new association.
 2. The new association is to serve as a Lutheran interchurch agency for common theological study and Christian service:
 - a. *Common Theological Study*: The agency is to seek theological consensus in a systematic and continuing way on the basis of the Scriptures and the witness of the Lutheran Confessions.
 - b. *Christian Service*: The agency is to give participating bodies opportunity to work together in the fulfilling of their responsibility of Christian service in functions to be specified in the constitution and bylaws of the agency.
 3. The establishment of pulpit and altar fellowship and organic unions shall be outside the sphere of the agency.
 - a. Formal steps toward these objectives shall be left to the initiative and decision of the church bodies concerned.
 - b. Except for theological studies, each participating body shall have the option of declining cooperation in individual activities of the agency.
 - c. Cooperation in the several activities carried on by the agency is to be limited to the participating bodies. Only by unanimous consent of the participating bodies of the agency may exceptions be made.
 4. Participating bodies shall be free to enter or continue relationships outside this agency; and
- II. Appoint seven persons to meet with a similar number of representatives of each of the other churches issuing and accepting this invitation to develop a constitution and, as found expedient, additional rules of procedure for the proposed association, all of which are to be submitted to the appropriate church conventions for action if possible by 1965.

February 2, 1962

As the proposed resolution shows, the participants in the meetings mentioned above are of the opinion that sufficient agreement has been found for the formation of a new inter-Lutheran agency which will not only replace the National Lutheran Council, but will embrace, if possible, all Lutheran bodies in the United States. The necessary basis of agreement for such an undertaking is supposedly found in the essays prepared for those three meetings. The publication of these essays enables every Lutheran pastor and professor in the United States to examine the evidence himself and to draw from it his own conclusion, whether this necessary agreement has indeed been found. The conclusions drawn from the examination of these essays will doubtless be affected by the degree of agreement deemed necessary by the individual for cooperation among Lutherans. It is therefore possible that opposite conclusions may be arrived at from an evaluation of the essays under consideration.

It is the purpose of this effort to make an evaluation of the essays and to endeavor to answer the question: Is there sufficient unity on the doctrine of the Gospel, and is there sufficient unity on the meaning of subscription to the Lutheran Confessions to warrant the formation of a new cooperative association of Lutheran churches in America?

I. Sufficient Unity on the Doctrine of the Gospel?

The first pair of essays concerns itself with the statement in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession: “And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.”

Both essayists begin by defining what they understand by “the doctrine of the Gospel.” Dr. Bergendoff defines the *doctrina evangelii* as “what the New Testament proclaims in the church of Christ.” He seems to differentiate between the Gospel content of the Scriptures and the Scriptures themselves. He correctly points out that the German text of the Augsburg Confession calls the doctrine of the Gospel *die Predigt des Evangelii*, a preaching of the Word of God, but then goes on to say, “The Gospel is the Word of God active in the minds and hearts of man. ‘God is making his appeal’ through those who proclaim Him. The Gospel is the working of the power of God to bring man into a right relationship with God not only a communication of intellectual propositions.” Throughout his presentation one has the feeling that he does not equate the Holy Scriptures, the whole inspired Scriptures, every word of them, with the Gospel, but speaks of the Gospel as something that is contained in, found in, taught in, preached in the Scriptures.

Dr. Franzmann’s definition is more comprehensive in this respect. To him the Gospel is the sum total of all that is contained in the sacred Scriptures. “All valid doctrines are refractions of the one marvelous light: all valid teachings are inflections of the voice of the one Good Shepherd,” he says. He stresses the fact that “all Scripture is inspired” (II Tim. 3:16). He adds that “One cannot say ‘doctrine of the Gospel’ or ‘Gospel’ without saying ‘Law’ also; for the Gospel is a power of God to deliver men from their desperate situation under the wrath of God” (Rom. 1:16–18). The Gospel is the good news of salvation “which God promised before through his prophets in Holy Scriptures” (Rom. 1:2).

This difference is apparent also in the comments made by the two essayists in the discussion that followed the reading of their respective essays. Dr. Bergendoff said: “We agree that the doctrine of the Gospel is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and that the New Testament gives us the standard of teaching of the church. I have emphasized the central truths of this revelation as being those that unify the church. Prof. Franzmann has stressed the radiation of these truths into the fullness of the glory of the message.”

Dr. Franzmann remarked: “Both papers make the ‘teaching of the Gospel,’ or ‘the Gospel’ simply (sic) the indispensable and inviolable basis of the unity of the church. Both, therefore, submit in principle to the authority of the Scriptures. The NLC presentation tends to view the ‘doctrine of the Gospel’ in antithesis to ‘whole theological systems’ and to emphasize its basic simplicity. The Missouri presentation views the doctrine of the Gospel in its organic connection with the whole of divine revelation and therefore tends to stress the innate comprehensiveness and complexity of the doctrine of the Gospel.”

This difference becomes even more apparent when they continue to discuss the true unity of the church. On this subject Dr. Bergendoff says, “The unity of Christians allows for a variety of manifestations... To be of service in material blessings is no less sacred service than the ministrations of ‘spiritual blessings’ (Rom. 15:26, 27). One cannot be called ‘external,’ and the other ‘sacred,’ as if Christ could be divided. Christ is one. Christian faith and love likewise are integral and inseparable.” He goes on to say, “There is warrant neither in Scripture nor in the Confessions for a demand that a whole theological system be held in common before a unity can be established between groups of Christians. Nor can unity be denied except when there is not agreement on the teaching of the Gospel. To claim that there must be perfect observance of all that the church teaches before fellowship can exist is to go beyond Scripture, which demands unity in the preaching of what Christ commanded but itself reveals much incompleteness in the observance of the command.” At the end of his presentation he concludes: “In short we may claim that in the degree to which we can come to a common understanding of the Gospel, in that degree we are able to work together in the ministry of reconciliation. Lutherans who have unity in a confessional understanding of the message of the Gospel are in a fellowship, which expresses itself at pulpit and altar and then goes on to an expanding program of service at home and all over the world. With other Christians who profess faith in the Gospel Lutherans may recognize a partial unity

by a fellowship of certain types of common evangelism and even forms of prayer and thanksgiving, while working toward a more complete unity expressed in pulpit and altar fellowship.”

Dr. Franzmann says that “there is a close connection between the ‘doctrine of the Gospel’ and the kind of unity of which John 17:20–23 speaks... But if the passage does not speak directly to the problem of Christian unity, it deals with a reality that is basic to it and points up two basic aspects of this unity: the unity of the church rests on the revelatory action of God, and it is a Christological-personal unity... The existence and the unity of the church therefore depend on this: that the church remain under the call of God and in Christ.” He then points out, “The unity of the church both is and becomes. It is both, a divinely given reality and an empirical reality in the process of being attained or actualized.” After calling attention to the fact that in this world not all Christians attain an equal degree of faith, and that therefore the strong in faith must bear with the weak, as long as both the weak and the strong recognize the word of God as the authority under which they are both in their peculiarity permitted by God’s grace to live, he remarks on the phrase “it is enough”: “Generalizations like ‘we are all good Lutherans’ or ‘we all subscribe to the Confessions’—do they really meet the challenge of our situation? Ought we not rather all be asking ourselves whether we are taking our confessions with the eschatological seriousness of the confessors?”

The different attitudes are clearly apparent here. In his comments on the essays Dr. Bergendoff admits: “We agree that obedience from the heart to the standard of teaching is essential, and is part of the doctrine of the Gospel. I have probably been more eager to suggest that this can take place within the fellowship created by the unity of doctrine and is not a prerequisite of such unity, while Prof. Franzmann has been concerned that the imperative to obedience be ‘built into the Gospel.’ ”

Dr. Franzmann says, “The NLC presentation looks toward a variety of ecumenical relationships and envisages degrees or stages of fellowship proportionate to the degree of consensus which has been attained. The Missouri presentation is oriented toward doctrinal confessional unity between Lutherans.”

Though their presentations sometimes bear some resemblance to each other in wording and even in content, their conclusions are definitely not alike. The NLC representative seems ready to practice what fellowship is possible even before doctrinal unity is achieved, whereas the Missouri Synod presentation still looks for doctrinal unity before full fellowship practice.

II. Sufficient Unity on the Meaning of Subscription to the Lutheran Confessions?

The second pair of essays concerns itself with the significance of confessional subscription. The question here is, “What do the various Lutheran bodies in America understand their subscription to the Lutheran Confessions to mean?” The constitutions of all Lutheran bodies in the U. S. A. require of their members, both clergy and congregations, that they subscribe to the Confessions contained in the *Book of Concord* of 1580, while in Europe this is no longer the case in every instance. But here in America, all Lutherans do not subscribe to the Confessions in the same light, nor are they considered by all to be of the same importance.

Dr. Tappert calls attention to the fact that most of the Lutheran Confessions were the product of a brief period of eight years from 1529–1537. This to him indicates that they pertain particularly to the theological problems of the 16th century and are relevant particularly for that period. He believes that “when subscribing the Confessions today, Lutherans assert that, in view of the issues which were then at stake and the alternatives which were then offered, the confessors were right.” This statement implies that today that is no longer necessarily the case. He elaborates on this thought by making statements such as, “We no longer assert as unqualifiedly as the Augsburg Confession did that baptism is necessary to salvation, and we are rather less sure than the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope that Matthew 16:18, 19 refers to Peter’s confession instead of Peter. He further states, “The Confessions are themselves a literary deposit of the living encounter which men in the sixteenth century had with God when they heard his Word. They affirm that God will speak to later generations in similar fashion. They may be said to presuppose that later generations, standing in the same horizontal tradition, will apprehend and express their own encounter with God in relation to the situation in which they then find themselves... It is accordingly a part of the continuing theological task of the church to

discover, in so far as this is possible, what the truth is, and not merely to defend or apologize for an utterance in the Confessions.”

In Dr. Bouman’s essay he begins with the idea that what makes us Lutherans and distinguishes us from other church bodies is our acceptance of the symbols of the Lutheran Church. He is willing to admit that “the confessional writings desire to meet fully the ecclesiastical and theological requirements of their day, yet they make no claim of offering a compendium of pat answers to any and every question that might be raised today or tomorrow... We shall do justice to the problem of our acceptance of them only when we take them on their own terms, in a way that is consistent with their purpose and function.” He further makes the point that “the Lutheran symbols accept the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures as the sole, authoritative, unalterable, and final source of all Christian doctrine.” Then he draws the conclusion, “This, it seems to me, is the central purpose and function of the symbols: to direct men away from themselves to the Scriptures in such a way that they will find there what they are meant to find: a gracious God in Christ... Clearly, I cannot subscribe to the symbols if I am a synergist or believe that man has a free will in spiritual matters, or that man can assist in his conversion. I cannot subscribe to the Confessions and at the same time accept a reformed doctrine of the Holy Communion. I cannot consistently give my heart and hands to a Christ-exalting theology, and at the same time condone a Christian natural religion. I cannot subscribe to the doctrine without a constant struggle to conform my life to it.”

These two views again are not identical. The differences, which have long existed between the attitude of the National Lutheran Council churches and the members of the Synodical Conference in regard to Confessional subscription, are still clearly brought out in these essays. When we remember that these four essays were prepared and read for the purpose of seeking a basis for cooperation between the Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council, we cannot but wonder whether these essays have revealed any such basis that did not exist before. Have the two segments of American Lutheranism drawn any closer together? Is there now a possibility of greater cooperation than in the past? If so, is it due to a change in the doctrinal position of either or both of the two bodies involved? It is questions of this nature that we would expect to find answered in the last pair of essays, both of which bear the title:

III. What Kind of Cooperation is Possible In View of the Discussions to Date?

In the report jointly issued by the participating bodies after their third meeting in Chicago October 31 and November 1, 1961, this result was announced: “Two things became apparent. The papers and the discussions revealed that there are still points of doctrine that require further systematic study. Further, these conversations established the fact that there is a greater extent of consensus on the subjects discussed than had been generally realized ... It was the unanimous judgment of all participants in these consultations that the papers and discussions have revealed a consensus on the doctrine of the Gospel and the meaning of confessional subscription sufficient to justify further exploration regarding the possible establishment of a cooperative agency to replace the National Lutheran Council as presently constituted.”

This conclusion comes somewhat as a surprise. We have seen that there are still considerable differences between the National Lutheran Council and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the area of the doctrines discussed by them. These differences they seem to overlook. Instead, they are amazed at the supposed agreement they have discovered and are thinking in terms of the degree of cooperation which is possible under the circumstances, rather than seeking to eliminate whatever obstacles to cooperation they still find. This is apparent also in their respective answers to the question, “What kind of cooperation is possible in view of the discussions to date?”

Dr. Rogness displays this attitude in the introduction of his essay, where he says, “I ... am tempted to brush aside the impediments of our respective histories and declare that there is nothing within our Lutheran family to keep us from being at once a solid phalanx in our approach to our sister denominations and to the world.” He asks, “Can we with good ground do our theological tasks separately while joining hands in deeds of Christian service?” He reasons that if the National Lutheran Council and The Lutheran Church—Missouri

Synod can cooperate in as many activities as they do, including service to prisoners of war, refugees, immigrants and the world's needy, they ought also to be able to worship with one another, since Christian service to others becomes qualitatively the same as worship. It is apparent throughout his entire presentation that he is thinking in terms of cooperation in every possible way even before doctrinal unity is achieved. "We do have a rather massive, solid common consensus as Lutheran churches," he observes, and goes on to say, "For our people to give open recognition to this state of affairs would be salutary. And for the churches to be allied (instead of arrayed over against one another) with one another ... would be splendid strategy for this hour." He then proceeds to outline the major steps embodied in the joint resolution which resulted from this third meeting and which was presented to and adopted by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in its convention in Cleveland, Ohio, June 20–29, 1962. He fears that "failing to justify our separateness to our laity, we will take on the image of Lutheran cults or sects." Thus he agrees with Dr. Bergendoff, who had concluded his essay with the statement: "The proposition of complete unity or none at all cannot be defended on scriptural grounds, nor is it the description of a unity between the believer and the Redeemer which issues in a unity between believers that varies according to circumstances. It is a continuing task of the church to identify the unity that exists and bear witness to it that the world may believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Dr. Franzmann feels that he is "in a sort of theological no-man's-land" when he speaks of "cooperation without full doctrinal consensus." He realizes that there is "a close and organic relationship between confessional agreement and cooperation." Historically, he says, there have been three approaches to this problem: "(a) an all-or-nothing insistence on complete doctrinal agreement as the indispensable basis for any cooperation; (b) cooperation in externals; (c) cooperation for the duration of an emergency." The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been more or less identified with the first approach. This, he feels, has the weakness that "often the only service that can be rendered by a church pursuing this ideal is that of witness by abstention, which is often powerful but seldom articulate." The second option, he believes, "does safeguard the confessional integrity of the cooperating bodies and has the merits of greater efficiency and better stewardship." He cites the National Lutheran Council as an example of this attitude. The third approach can hardly be called a satisfactory solution to the problem of cooperation in his opinion, because life is not only emergencies and cannot be lived on a theology of emergencies. Mindful of the absence of pulpit and altar fellowship, not only between the National Lutheran Council and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, but also within the National Lutheran Council itself, he points out how much remains to be done. He warns, "cooperation can never become an end in itself: there should be a prime emphasis on deepening and broadening the existing consensus." Then, however, he speaks of the impact of the witness of organized cooperation between Lutheran bodies of witnessing to one another. He sees in greater cooperation of Lutheran bodies in various areas an opportunity for fostering something that has not been possible in the past. "A theological dialogue between American Lutherans in breadth and depth and in an atmosphere of common candor and mutual trust, and concludes that it is possible that more intense cooperation between Lutheran bodies may yet lead them to greater confessional solidarity.

This appears to be a decided departure from the former position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as expressed in a pamphlet issued by that body and entitled "The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod." This pamphlet makes the statement: "Missouri Synod Lutherans feel conscience-bound to unite in fellowship and worship only with those with whom they are agreed in Scriptural teachings. In this way they believe that they are following God's Word, which says, 'Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them' (Rom. 16:17)."

It would seem that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has yielded to a considerable extent to the contention of the National Lutheran Council that it is neither possible nor necessary to agree in all doctrines, and that there are wholesome and allowable latitudes of theological opinion. If the National Lutheran Council and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are closer together today than before, if they find it possible to cooperate in areas in which such cooperation was not possible heretofore, it is doubtless because The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has begun to drift from its theological moorings and is adopting the attitude of more liberal Lutheran bodies. In any case, hoping to achieve greater confessional solidarity to say nothing of doctrinal

agreement by the practice of a greater degree of cooperation is the exact reverse of what was formerly the policy of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.