

The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America

By Donald F. Bitter

“Pope John, perhaps 1961’s largest religious newsmaker, also this week signed the papal bull setting the *Ecumenical Council* in the Vatican for some time in 1962. The Council, he declared, must rally Christendom against militant atheism operating on a world scale. He also sent five official observers to the World Council of Churches’ Third Assembly and said non-Catholic observers will be welcomed at the Ecumenical Council.” So reads the article titled “Religion made Bold Headlines in 1961” in the December 30 issue of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. Continuing in his observations of religious highlights, the editor writes, “Besides its message on peace and social conditions, the World Council of Churches’ Third Assembly at New Delhi made other religious news. It overwhelmingly accepted the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church into membership. . . . The new member church is one of 23 admitted to the WCC membership. The 1961 additions to the World Council swelled its aggregate membership to well over 300 million souls.”

The summary continues, “*Christian Unity* moved forward on New Year’s Eve when the new American Lutheran Church began to function officially. The other large Lutheran *merger*, the Lutheran Church in America, also progressed, with approval by both the giant United Lutheran Church in America and the Augustana Synod, and the *merger convention* scheduled for 1962. Also the Evangelical and Reformed and Congregational Christian *merger bodies* forming the United Church of Christ approved the constitution this year.”

Time Magazine dated March 2, 1962, headed its Religion Column with “*Ecumenical Stirrings*,” and made the following observations: “John Calvin never met Martin Luther. Over the centuries, the doctrinal heirs of the two great reformers have often seemed to interpret this happenstance of history as a command to avoid spiritual alliances. But the new *spirit of ecumenism* is changing all that. For the first time in U.S. history, 25 leading churchmen from all of North America’s major Lutheran and Reformed (chiefly Presbyterian) churches gathered a fortnight ago for a serious *dialogue* on the theologies of these two traditions of the Protestant faith.” The same article continues: “The National Lutheran Council meeting last month, endorsed a plan to set up a new *cooperative agency* for Lutheran bodies. Purpose: to bring in the big (2,400,000) Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, largest of the Lutheran groups outside the NLC, which has avoided close contact with churches whose Doctrine seemed too liberal.”

“In April, representatives of the United Church of Christ, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the Protestant Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Church will meet in Washington for the first official discussions of a *four-way merger* into the new “catholic and reformed” church proposed by Dr. Eugene Carson Blake.”

“In June, the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the United Lutheran Church in America will *merge*. The new denomination, with 3,000,000 members will be the nation’s sixth largest Protestant group.” So far *Time* Magazine.

Ecumenical Council, ecumenical stirrings, the spirit of ecumenism, Christian unity, mergers, dialogue, cooperative agency—The day has come when these high-sounding phrases once thought proper only for theologians and theological journals are found on the pages of the newspapers and magazines in the average American home. And they all bear testimony to the fact that the Ecumenical Movement, the drive toward union of all Christian Churches, is as much a subject of current discussion as the present administration’s medicare program or the admission of Red China into the United Nations.

While the term ecumenism and Ecumenical Movement may be fairly new, the efforts to overcome divisions in the churches is not new. It is as old as the divisions themselves. When factions arose in the congregation at Corinth, St. Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians seeks to eliminate these divisions. In the

divisions caused by the “Arian” controversy in the third century, the “Nestorian” and “Monophysite” controversy in the fifth century, there was always serious effort to rejoin the separated ranks. Even the “Great Schism,” the separation of the Eastern Orthodox Churches from the Roman Catholic Churches in 1054 A.D. over the primacy of the Roman pope, was not without its efforts at reunion. In 1274 A.D. at the second Council of Lyons and again in 1439 A.D. at the Council of Florence, strenuous efforts were made to bring the Eastern and Western Churches back into one body. And although formally the efforts seemed successful, it never became a practical reality and the division exists to this day.

The divisions in Christendom were further multiplied by the Reformation of the 16th century. After the smoke of theological battle had cleared there emerged—apart from Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy—Anglicanism and Protestantism, the latter with its two great branches of Lutheranism and Calvinism. Nor were these divisions without succeeding efforts at reunion. Who can forget the Colloquy at Marburg (1529) when Luther and Zwingli were instructed to seek unity. The result was the Marburg Articles with agreement on fourteen points of doctrine and disagreement on but one, the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Yet this was sufficient to provoke Luther’s oft-quoted evaluation of Zwingli and his theology, “ihr habt einen anderen Geist,” you have a different spirit.

When debate and discussion produced no unity between the Lutheran and Reformed churches, at least one man grew tired of the apparently endless and useless debate and took matters into his own hands. He was Frederick William III of Prussia, who resolved to put an end to the disunity, at least in his own domain, by governmental decree. The result was the Prussian Union of 1817, forcibly uniting the Lutheran and Reformed churches into one body called the Evangelical State Church of Prussia. Needless to say such a forced union without common convictions did nothing to bring about true unity.

In general then, it must be said of the efforts to unite Christian Churches before the 19th century, that they met with little or no success. And instead of the divisions being reduced during the first 1800 years of the Christian Church, they were multiplied.

The 19th century proved to be the period of transition in which new divisions appeared, but some old divisions also disappeared.

However, it is only within the last 50 years, since 1910, that the preoccupation with union among the Christian Churches has taken on the proportions of a “movement.” While the efforts of the first 1800 years were scattered and unsuccessful, the efforts of the last 50 years have been continuous and remarkably successful. Today church union is “in the air.” It is simply taken for granted that all Christendom will eventually be united, that it’s just a matter of time until this unity is achieved.

But no such “movement” of world-wide proportions can be born without a period of incubation. For the Ecumenical Movement this was the period of Pietism in 18th century and the age of Liberalism in the 19th century. These two forerunners set the stage for the Ecumenical Movement.

Pietism is the name applied to the movement of the 18th century which decried the formalism to which much religion had been reduced and stressed the necessity of consecrated Christian living. It was part of a very wide-spread evangelical revival. It emphasized the Christian life, but usually at the expense of Christian doctrine.

The period of Pietism produced Count Zinzendorf of the continent; John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in England; and Jonathan Whitefield Edwards and other revivalist preachers in the United States. And while we would not want to imply that these men had as their goal the union of all Christians, or that they might in any sense be called fathers of the Ecumenical Movement, they nevertheless did help to set the stage for this movement by discrediting confessionalism and orthodoxy and stressing the activity and the life of the Christian.

But the world was not yet ready for the Ecumenical Movement as such in the 18th century. There was still too much respect for the Bible. There was still too much consciousness of Scriptural truth and an awareness of the necessity of at least a large measure of agreement before unity could be possible or even desirable. It remained for the liberalism of the 19th century to supplement the pietism of the 18th century and thus condition

the world for the Ecumenical Movement. The liberal, rational theology of the 19th century began to question the authority and reliability of the Bible. It was the day of “higher criticism” of the Scriptures when first the Pentateuch, finally every book of the Bible was sifted in the seining of human judgment and found wanting. It was the time of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1767-1834) of whom the *Concordia Cyclopaedia* says: “He was both a rationalist and a pantheist. His pernicious influence upon modern Protestant theology is clearly traceable, having led it into the paths of developing its doctrines from the inner consciousness of the individual heart instead of founding it upon the impregnable Rock of the Holy Scriptures.” It was the day of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) who set forth the anti-Scriptural theory of evolution, daring to contradict God Himself on the question of the origin of the world and man. The typical liberal theologian of the 19th century is described by Prof. Blume in his essay “Why We Believe That the Bible is the Word of God” (*Proceedings*, 1961, p. 116) as “the man who believed and loudly said that much of the Bible is irrelevant to life in the present day world: that much of the Bible had best be silently ignored: and the rest was at best a collection of fairy tales.”

With such an attitude toward the Holy Scriptures it is a small wonder that in this period the conviction became rather widespread that in all religions, and not exclusively in the Christian religion, God must be revealing something of Himself.

The liberalism of the 19th century then also helped to prepare the way for the Ecumenical Movement with its rationalistic approach to the Bible which finally made it completely unreliable and unnecessary as a source of religious truth.

And so with the twentieth century came the age of unionism. Union was in the air. The nations of the world banded together in the League of Nations and more recently in the United Nations. The forces of labor sought security and strength in labor unions. And the churches found it easy now to follow suit, to walk the path of unionism which had been paved by pietism and liberalism in the two preceding centuries.

It must of course remain for historians of the future to see the Ecumenical Movement in perspective and evaluate all its effects. However, we are children of our times. We are surrounded by this movement. And the simplest solution would be to permit ourselves to drift along in the stream. But since it has to do with our most holy faith and ultimately our eternal salvation, it behooves us to examine this movement as best we can to determine its detriments and its dangers.

To that end we have been asked to present “a picture and evaluation of the Ecumenical Movement as it has been developing in recent years.”

The Ecumenical Movement and its Effect on Lutheranism in America

- I. The Holy Christian Church is truly ecumenical.
- II. The Ecumenical Movement is a world-wide movement which has achieved visible union between many churches and has as its ultimate goal the visible union of all Christian denominations.
- III. The Ecumenical Movement has left its mark on Lutheranism in America.

I

The Holy Christian Church is Truly Ecumenical

Strictly speaking the term ecumenical means “universal,” including all Christendom. In that sense it has traditionally been used of the Ecumenical Councils in which all Christendom was represented, or of the Ecumenical Creeds which are accepted throughout Christendom. In recent years, however, the term has been used more and more in the sense of unity, so that when theologians speak of an ecumenical church they mean a united church, and when they speak of the ecumenical spirit they mean the spirit of unity. The ecumenist is the

one who seeks to bring about union and the Ecumenical Movement is the move toward one united church. It is in this latter sense that the term will also be used throughout this paper.

Using the term ecumenical now in the modern sense of “united,” we can say that the Church, the Holy Christian Church, is ecumenical. It is one. It has no divisions. For the Holy Christian Church is that one great body to which belong all true believers in Christ and only believers. It is the communion of saints, the gathering of the faithful on earth and in heaven.

It might seem rather fundamental to Lutheran Christians to hear this reminder, for it is something we all learned before we were confirmed and confess in our churches every Sunday when we say, “I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.” But it is just at this point that the rabid ecumenist often betrays a gross misunderstanding of the nature of the Church, and in his frantic efforts to promote unity of all denominations so that, as he says, the broken body of Christ may be one, he seems to lose sight of the fact that the body of Christ is one. The ecumenist will invariably confuse the one Holy Christian Church with the various visible gatherings of individuals who profess to be Christians, and insist that these visible gatherings or denominations must be united before the Christian Church can claim unity.

A typical statement is that of Lesslie Newbigin in his book *Is Christ Divided?* He writes: “The disunity of the Church is a denial of the promise (of Christ) and a contradiction of the purpose for which the church is sent into the world. How can the church give to the world the message that Jesus is able to draw all men to Himself, while it continues to say, ‘Nevertheless, Jesus is not able to draw us who bear His name together?’ How will the world believe a message which we do not appear to believe ourselves? The divisions of the church are a public denial of the sufficiency of the atonement.” The same writer again betrays his mistaken concept of the Church when he says, “In the middle of the world God has set His church as His witness. He expects His church to be recognizable as His family. He expects that the glory which He gave to His Son, and which has been given to us, will be visible to the world in the common life of a redeemed brotherhood.”

Dialog, a new journal of theology published by Lutherans who seek to promote the Ecumenical Movement, has in its statement of aim the following: “*Dialog* is conscious not only of the cleavage in life between the church and the world, but also of the fractured body of Christ. It regards the present denominational fragmentation of the church catholic as a malignant condition within the body of Christ.” And although it goes on to speak of the ultimate reunion of the churches as “an empirical manifestation of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church,” to call the body of Christ fragmented and fractured is at best confusing.

In the face of all this human testimony to the contrary, we are persuaded that the Scriptures present the Church of Christ as truly united, as already ecumenical, as one body of believers; not held together by any external organizational ties, but inseparably joined by the bond of a common faith in Jesus. Indeed, if the Church includes all men the world over who truly believe in Christ, it is evident that there can be but one Church. Therefore Christ also speaks of “one fold and one Shepherd,” (John 10:16). Paul describes the oneness and unity of the Church thus: “Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in the one hope, of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all,” (Eph. 4:3-6). “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ,” (Gal. 3:28). Also the terms which describe the Church as the “City of God” (Ps. 46:4), “the Temple of God” (I Cor. 3:16-17), “the Body of Christ” (Eph. 1:22-23), “the Bride of Christ” (Rev. 21:2), and others, show that the Church is one.

The true ecumenicity of the Christian Church is correctly described by E.W. Koehler in *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* as follows: “While all believers are most intimately joined by faith to Christ, their Savior, they are for this very reason also most intimately joined to one another by the bond of a common faith, a common hope, and a mutual love, and thus they constitute, no matter how far apart locally they may be from each other, a single body, a great communion, which we call the Church.” (*A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, p. 238)

By its very nature this ecumenicity of the Church is not visible to the eyes of men. Because faith, by which men become members of the Church, is a matter of the heart, and cannot be seen, therefore the Church itself is invisible to man. An outward profession of faith is not an absolute guarantee of true faith in the heart. But while the Church and its glorious unity is invisible to man, it is definitely known to the Lord, for He knows all its members. To the discerner of hearts true faith is evident and “The Lord knoweth them that are His,” (II Tim. 1:12).

But while the Church as such is invisible and we cannot definitely designate individuals as members of the Church, we can say with certainty that the Church is present wherever the Gospel is taught and the Sacraments are administered. It is by these means that the Holy Spirit calls and gathers individuals into the One Church. And God has promised, “My Word shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I send it,” (Is. 55:11). So then in every Christian denomination where the Gospel is preached, also in those where there is false doctrine besides the fundamental truths of the Gospel, there will be true Christians. And each one of these is united with Christ and all other Christians by faith.

This is the picture of the Church which the Scriptures paint for us; invisible to our eyes, yet absolutely real and an object of our faith. The Church of Jesus Christ is one. “Wherever the New Testament speaks of the Church or of churches the reference is always to believers, to the communion of saints or to a part of it present at any given locality.” (From the Statement on “the Church” of our Doctrinal Commission—*Proceedings*, 1961, p. 188).

It was Luther who again brought to light this correct Scriptural concept of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church, as well as the separated Eastern Orthodox church, had come to identify the Christian Church with their own outward visible organizations. The Roman church applied every statement of the Bible regarding the Church to the organization of Catholicism. And when it declared “extra ecclesiam nulla sancta est,” outside of the Church there is no salvation, a statement which is true when said of the Holy Christian Church, it applied this again to the visible organization ruled by the Roman pontiff.

But as Luther’s eyes were opened by his study of the Scriptures to many false doctrines of the Roman church, he was led also to a proper understanding of the nature of the true Church. And so he writes: “Scripture speaks of the Church very simply and uses the expression in one sense only—According to Scripture, the Church is the assembly of all those on earth who believe in Christ, just as we pray in the Creed: I believe in the Holy Ghost. . . a communion of saints. This community or assembly consists of all who live in true faith, hope, and love, so that the essence, life, and nature of the Church is not a bodily, but a spiritual assembly of hearts in one faith. . . Hence although they be a thousand miles apart in body, they are yet an assembly in spirit because each one preaches, believes, hopes, loves, and lives like the other” (*What Does Luther Say*, Vol. 1, p. 260). Regarding the efforts to identify the true Church with some outward organization Luther has this to say: “All those who make the Christian communion (Versammlung) a material and outward matter, like other communities, in reality, are Jews. For the Jews are likewise expecting their Messiah to establish an external kingdom at a certain specified place—Jerusalem. But by such a view people sacrifice that faith which makes the kingdom of Christ alone a thing of the spirit and the heart” (*What Does Luther Say*, Vol. 1, p. 272).

This Scriptural concept of the Church, brought to light again by Luther, also became the public confession of the Lutheran Church. The Augsburg Confession, Article VII states: “Also they teach that the holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.” The Apology, Article VII, VIII; declares: “Wherefore we hold, according to the Scriptures, that the Church, properly so called, is the congregation of saints (of those here and there in the world), who truly believe the Gospel of Christ, and have the Holy Ghost.”

And this doctrine of the true unity of the Christian Church, so clearly taught in the Bible, and so simply set forth by Luther and the Confessions, we also still believe and teach today. To question number 237, “What, then, is the Church?” our catechism answers, “The Church is the communion of saints or the congregation of all Christians.” In the statement on “The Church” prepared by our Doctrinal Commission we find: “The Church is

the communion of saints, the entire number of those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Christ as their Savior and whom through this gracious gift of a common faith He has most intimately joined together to form one congregation, one body, one blessed fellowship” (*Proceedings*, 1961, p. 188).

But what has all this to do with the Ecumenical Movement? It is fundamental to the consideration of the whole matter that we retain a clear conception of the true nature of the Church and a firm conviction that the true Church is ecumenical, is united in a very wonderful and intimate way. This truth is vital, not only to counteract the undue and unscriptural emphasis of the Ecumenical Movement on the visible congregations, but to set our hearts at ease, at least to some degree, with regard to the many divisions in Christendom.

The visible organizations of Christendom are surely hopelessly divided. And these divisions are without a doubt the work of Satan. Having been unsuccessful in destroying Christianity in its infancy by persecution from without, the devil raised up false teachers within to sow the weeds of false doctrine and thereby brought about one separation after another. The efforts of Satan have left the visible church divided into three major branches: Catholicism, Protestantism, and Anglicanism. Each of these is again further divided, Catholicism into the East and the West, Protestantism between the Lutheran and Reformed bodies, and Anglican into the high-church, low-church, and broad-church elements. Further subdivisions bring the number of denominations into the hundreds, all varying to some degree in doctrine and/or practice. But what then, has the devil succeeded? Has he gained at least a measure of victory over Christ and the Church? No, not if we remember the true nature of the Church. It is still one, still strong, still safe and secure. Of every one of its members Jesus still says, “No man shall pluck them out of my hands.” Though divisions in the visible church should increase a hundred-fold, which may God graciously prevent, yet the Church of Christ would remain one. In this life we shall have to content ourselves to believe in the Holy Christian Church, but when we once stand before the Throne and before the Lamb with all saints, when we shall see Christ, the Head, face to face, then we shall also see His body which is the Church.

But it is just this sorry state of a divided Christendom with which the proponents of the Ecumenical Movement concern themselves and seek to correct. In effect they seek to make visible that which is invisible. So let us proceed on this firm footing that the Holy Christian Church is truly ecumenical to a consideration of the Ecumenical Movement, the world-wide movement which has prompted many church mergers and has as its ultimate goal the visible union of all Christian denominations.

II

The Ecumenical Movement is a World-Wide Movement which has Achieved Visible Union Between Many Churches and has as its Ultimate Goal the Visible Union of All Christian Denominations

The visible union of all Christian denominations—what a fascinating thought! What a commendable goal! Certainly no one worthy of the name Christian would want to find fault with a desire for unity. On the contrary, a longing for outward ecumenicity in Christendom must beat in every Christian breast. The desire to grasp the hand of every true child of God in visible fellowship will not easily be stilled. The crux of the matter is how is this union to be achieved. And here we must examine some of the basic principles of the Ecumenical Movement by which the longing for outward union has been translated into actual mergers, federations, councils, conferences, and cooperative agencies between almost all the world’s Christian denominations. And as we do so it is well to bear in mind both the grandmother and the mother of this movement, namely pietism and liberalism, the former with its emphasis on Christian doing and living, the latter with its contempt for the Bible and its rationalization of all religious truth.

The Ecumenical Movement has received its impetus in the main from three principles, all of which, we shall see shortly, are unscriptural and therefore not God-pleasing. These principles are: 1. that outward union of the churches is absolutely vital, for, the extension of Christ’s Kingdom, for the defense of the Church against her enemies, and that the prayer of Jesus for such unity might be answered; 2. that union is possible with a

minimum degree of unity in doctrine and practice; and 3. that it is a prime calling of the Church to improve the social, economical, and political conditions of the world.

1. The Ecumenical Movement proceeds from the premise that outward unity of the churches is vital for the extension of Christ's Kingdom and that only if the Christian Church can present a united front will she be accepted by those outside her pale. Indeed the cry goes up that the world will be conquered for Christ, if only the churches get together.

The pressure for unity for the sake of presenting a united front to the world has come especially from the mission fields where the divisions are deplored as stumbling blocks in the way of many prospective converts to Christianity. The statement of Lesslie Newbigin is typical. After describing how he presents Christ and the cross as the one hope of sinful men to an inquirer, he asks, "But is it not natural that the questioner should immediately reply: 'Yes, that is what you say; but it is not what you believe. For if you believed it, you would yourselves have found it true. You would have found in Jesus a center of unity deep enough and strong enough to overcome your

natural divisions and to bring you together as one family. If you really believed that the Name of Jesus is the one name under which all mankind is to be enrolled, you would yourselves have found that Name sufficient. But in fact you add all sorts of other names. Evidently you yourselves do not find in Him the secret that you are offering to us.'"

Certainly we can sympathize with the missionaries who find themselves embroiled, besides presenting the Christian religion to heathen, with the task of unraveling the twisted mass of denominational threads. Surely we would agree that, humanly speaking at least, it would be much simpler and more impressive to present a united front to the world, But does it follow that thereby the unbeliever would be more readily converted and the Kingdom of Christ more widely spread? Not if we remember the nature of the Church, that it isn't an impressive united front which brings men to faith, but the Holy Ghost, who calls them by the Gospel, enlightens them with His gifts, and sanctifies and keeps them with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

To say that the Church would be more acceptable to the heathen if it presented a united front, betrays again a false concept of the Church. To be sure it would make a bigger impression, and more than likely the impressiveness of a united Christendom would prove a powerful influence in getting many heathen to join the ranks. But this would not yet be winning them for the Church, the body of Christ. That can be done only by the preaching of the Word of God, the Law and the Gospel, leading sinners to repentance and faith in Christ the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world.

Indeed, if a united front were essential for the growth of the Church, then the Roman Catholic Church would have made the largest contribution. But what good is a united front when behind it is only a hollow shell of the Gospel. Catholicism with its united front is the fastest growing of all Christian religions. But would we be ready to concede that it is making the largest contribution to the growth of the Church, the real Church?

And if the plea is that the new convert is confused when he learns that there are so many different Christian religions, would he not be even more confused if he were to become a member of a united organization, only to find that there are a host of different and divergent teachings in this one united organization; that one teacher says God made the heavens and the earth in six days, the other that God gave the original impulse and then the world gradually evolved over a period of millions of years; that one teacher says Jesus rose bodily from the dead and that all Christians will do the same, while another says only the spirit of Jesus came forth from the grave while His body lies forever buried in Joseph's tomb? Would that not cause even more confusion? At least acquainting him with the divisions is honest and realistic.

No, a united front in itself will do nothing for the extension of Christ's Kingdom. A united front will not conquer the world for Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can do that through the Means of Grace. And if a divided Christendom hinders the cause of missions, then the honest thing is to seek the cause of divisions, and eliminate them. What is needed is not unity in organization, but unity in faith. Desirable? Yes, but it is at best deceiving to say that unity of organization is absolutely vital for the growth of the Church, for the extension of Christ's Kingdom.

The Ecumenical Movement considers unity an absolute essential also for the defense of the Church against her enemies. "In union there is strength," "Merge or be submerged," is the cry. A leader of the Ecumenical Movement has expressed his support "because the challenge of the world demands a united testimony" (Dr. P. O. Bersell, Augustana Lutheran). A pamphlet distributed by the Office of Information of the National Council of Churches entitled "What is the National Council of Churches?" asks the following question: "What can the churches do better together than alone?" And it answers: "Oppose the growing strength of the forces which challenge the Christian Gospel by reinforcing each with the strength of all." What is meant by "the forces that challenge the Christian Gospel?" Usually two such forces come to mind as most formidable and threatening to the church. They are the false religions which are beginning massive expansion programs, and godless communism which threatens to swallow up one nation after another. To combat these forces it is considered vital that all Christian denominations unite into one giant and powerful body. But what is the strength that is sought by such union? It is the strength of numbers, of prestige, of political influence. And this the Church does not need for her defense. The Church needs but One to defend her against all her enemies, and the Church has this sure defense. It is Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He will not suffer His body to be harmed. Of Him St. Paul declares for our everlasting comfort: "God raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come; and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the Head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all." Vital for the Church's defense against her enemies, against the challenge of the world, is not outward unity, but faith in Jesus Christ.

Since false religions, godless communism, and every other challenge to the Gospel are all tools of the one and self-same enemy, "the old evil foe," those who seek strength and find courage in unity might well consider Luther's hymn: "With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected; But for us fights the Valiant one, whom God Himself elected. Ask ye, who is this? Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord, and there's none other God; He holds the field forever." He who has said of His Church, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," will also be her defense against the challenges of the world.

Outward unity of all denominations, though most desirable, is not vital to the defense of the Church, if we remember what the Church is. Organizations, synods, federations, denominations may disintegrate and fall beneath the onslaught of the enemy. But the Church will stand forever.

The Ecumenical Movement also considers the outward unity of Christendom essential that the prayer which Jesus spoke on the night of His betrayal might finally be answered. Hardly a publication advocating union of all churches can be read which does not refer to this passage of the Bible as Scriptural evidence that such union is vital. It is recorded in the Gospel of St. John, chapter 17. The verses which are usually alluded to are 11-23. There Jesus, praying to the Father in heaven for His disciples there present and His believers for all time says:

And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, *that they may be one*, as we are one.

While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled.

And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves.

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil.

They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world.

And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word:

That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, *that they also may be one* in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; *that they may be one* even as we are one:

I in thee and thou in me, *that they may be made perfect in one*: and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.

For whom is Jesus praying this prayer, that they all may be one? Is it for the visible Christian churches, for all those who profess Christianity, as the ecumenists would have us believe? The Lord describes those for whom He is praying by saying to His Father, “I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word,” (v. 6). He is praying for those whom God had chosen out of the world and brought to faith in His Word. He is praying for those whom He in His omniscience saw to be true believers. Jesus continues His prayer, “I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me. I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them,” (8-10). Again it is evident that He is speaking of true believers, whom God purely out of grace and mercy had chosen out of the world and brought to a living faith in Christ. And for all these He prays that they might be one—And “neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word.” He includes every single believer whom the spirit of God, through the inspired words of the apostles, has brought to faith since that day and will still bring to faith until the number of the elect is complete. And this prayer of Jesus, which the ecumenists are so anxious to help fulfill, has been fulfilled. For the true believers are one, wonderfully and gloriously united, as we have already seen, in the Holy Christian Church. The apostles, the disciples, the martyrs who died in faith, and the believers today, they are all one in a blessed spiritual unity even as Jesus and the Father are one.

And yet the ecumenists insist on applying these words of the Lord to the visible Christendom. We quote again from Newbigin: “Our Lord says that He has given this glory to those who believe in Him ‘that they may be one even as we are one.’ Being children of God must mean being—in some recognizable sense—members of one family. All our rationalizations of schism and all our evasions of the plain meaning of Scripture will not enable us to side-step the logic of that argument. In some sense those who are children of one Father must be recognizable as members of one family. That is why this wonderful prayer is so filled with longing for the unity of Christ’s people—‘I in them and thou in me that they may become perfectly one.’ Those in whom the One Son of God dwells must be one brotherhood, delighting together to honor the one Father.”

Dialog, the theological journal referred to earlier, expresses its desire “to help in the healing process leading toward the ultimate reunion of the churches.” It claims neither “the spirit of shallow optimism” nor the “spirit of paralyzed pessimism” but states, “it is sufficient to take our Lord Jesus at His word when He prayed ‘that they all might be one.’” It continues, “We do not know how or when the Lord will act to integrate the members of His body into a unified expression of their faith and action, but the experience of the church indicates that reunion is realized through reconciliation, and reconciliation happens through the medium of discussion wherein we discover one another as already brothers in the faith. *Dialog* hopes to serve as such a medium where the issues which churches hold in difference and in common may be clearly and frankly defined.” While the goal may be commendable and the intentions honorable one is disturbed by the reference in this context to Jesus’ prayer for unity, as though that prayer had not yet been answered.

Indeed, it always seems a bit presumptuous to us that men feel constrained to see that this prayer is answered. They ought to remember that Jesus directed it to His Father, and, we have every confidence, was heard.

So then the first principle of ecumenism, that union of the churches is absolutely vital, for the extension of Christ’s Kingdom, for the defense of the Church, and for the fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer, has no foundation in the Scriptures. We repeat that this in no way implies that such union would not be desirable and God-pleasing. It would be both if the Scriptural conditions for unity would be met. And that brings us to the second plank in the platform of the Ecumenical Movement, namely, that union is possible with a minimum amount of unity in doctrine and practice.

2. When the ecumenical winds first began to blow, the tendency was to recognize differences in doctrine and prepare some type of compromise statement which both sides could interpret to their own liking. But gradually the dishonesty of this practice came to be recognized. The distinctive feature of modern union movements is that they no longer pretend to have arrived at unity, but instead glory in their diversity. “Unity of doctrine, they say, is not only unattainable, but undesirable.” Williams Adams Brown, of Union Theological Seminary, says in his book, *Toward a United Church*, with regard to the unity necessary for union: “Those who have united in the Movement have recognized that when finite and imperfect men are dealing with matters as high and deep as those which concern the Christian faith, one cannot expect complete agreement as to their meaning and implications. In any unity worthy of the name, there must be room for honest differences of conviction, not merely in unimportant matters of habit and preference, but even in matters of vital belief (p. 4). What is new in the present movement is the type of unity to which the churches have committed themselves. This is a unity which has broken once and for all with the ideal of conformity” (p. 6).

The views of John R. Mott, a recognized leader of the Ecumenical Movement a generation ago, are described as follows: “Christian truth, he said, is like a diamond with many facets. One church sees one facet of that truth; another church sees another facet of it; a third church still another facet, and so on. In order to get the whole truth, the whole diamond, we must combine all the churches with all their distinctive teachings into one comprehensive body. Then the ‘rent and sundered body of Christ’, as they call all visible Christendom, will be made whole again . . . As there are said to be 168 facets in a diamond, this makes room for practically all the major sects in the church today, so that everyone should be satisfied!” (Q.S., Vol. 56, p. 236)

It would seem that any Christian with even the most basic Bible knowledge would recognize this as advocating rank unionism. It blatantly ignores all the warnings of Holy Writ against false prophets and false doctrine. Jesus’ “Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” is brushed aside. St. Paul’s admonition, “A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject,” might as well have remained unsaid, as far as the ecumenist is concerned. In effect he crosses Roman 16.17: “Mark them which cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, and avoid them” out of his Bible and says defiantly, “Don’t avoid them, join them. Learn to live with their differences. They are only emphasizing different truths.”

But this principle not only openly advocates unionism, which God forbids, but proves to be, in fact, deceitful and dishonest. When the Lutheran Church teaches in accordance with the Scriptures that the body and

blood of Christ are truly present in the Lord's Supper and the Reformed Churches teach that the body and blood of Christ are not present, but merely represented, it is obvious that one is teaching true, Scriptural doctrine, the other false doctrine. By what stretch of the imagination can those two contradictory doctrines be said to be two aspects of the same truth? Or when the Lutheran Church teaches on the basis of the Bible that a man is justified by faith alone, without the deeds of the law, and this doctrine of justification by faith alone is officially condemned by the Roman Catholic Church, how can this be called two facets of the same diamond?

But should it surprise us that the Ecumenical Movement has espoused such a completely erroneous principle? Not if we remember that the Ecumenical Movement is a direct descendant of liberalism. Not if we realize that the ecumenical ship is being steered by modernists who have abandoned the Bible as the only source of divine truth.

St. Paul was not so indifferent to what modernists would term minor differences. The Judaizers insisted on circumcision and other O. T. rules and regulations as necessary for salvation, although they also accepted Christ. The ecumenists of our day would say, "We must respect their convictions." St. Paul spends a good portion of his letter to the Galatians pointing out the dangers of such convictions. And instead of respecting it, he denounces it as a deviation from the Gospel of Christ. Paul says in no uncertain terms, "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8-9). And by Paul God speaks. Yet we are certain that in our day Paul would be called narrow-minded and bigoted.

3. The third principle of the Ecumenical Movement, with which we are constrained to find fault on the basis of the Scriptures, is the claim that it is the church's calling to improve the social, economical, and political conditions of the world. "Let us be busy with deeds instead of creeds," is the rallying cry.

From its beginnings the Ecumenical Movement has stressed the need for greater efforts on the part of the churches to make this world a better place in which to live. The result has frequently been that the "social gospel" has replaced the real Gospel. To quote Lesslie Newbigin once again: "The Church's mission to all the nations—that phrase, of course, means more than what we call foreign missions. It means the total corporate witness of the churches and of all who profess and call themselves Christians to the sovereign love of God in Jesus (p. 34). . . I think that means, among other things, that we must make a much bigger effort than we have done, to bring the great issues of international politics, of economic policy, of commercial development, within the range of our thinking about the mission of the Church. It is not enough, for instance, that we should dispense charity on a vast scale to the poor and hungry of the world. It is a great and noble thing, new in its scale and vision, but it is not enough. Charity is greater than justice, but it is never a substitute for justice. We have, I believe, reached a stage in human history where we must bend our minds to the task of devising those economic and fiscal policies which will enable something like economic justice to be established among the peoples; to the creation of a situation in which the Indian or African peasant who labors all day in the sweat of his brow will not be rewarded by a mere pittance, while the same day's labor of a man in Western Europe, or Australia, or America produces the equivalent of a month's earnings in Asia. This task calls for the kind of dedicated and adventurous thinking which has, inside many of the western nations, abolished in our time the same kind of injustice between rich and poor. It calls also for costly and unpopular decisions in the realm of public policy. In both of these, Christians should surely be in the lead"(p. 35-36).

All this in the name of the Church, which is to rescue men from hell and save them for eternity.

Certainly Christians should concern themselves about the needs of others and should strive to improve living conditions. The Bible is full of admonitions encouraging Christians to be of service to others. Finally the second table of the Law, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," applies. However, when churches make it their self-appointed duty, as churches, to make political, social, and economic pronouncements, when they expend time and energy to promote peace and prosperity on earth, they are invading the realm which God has assigned to the government, for which He has ordained the "powers that be." The Church has another calling, to "preach the Gospel to every creature," to save men for the life to come.

The plea is often made that the NCC and other such federations are only cooperative agencies in which Christians cooperate in externals, that they are not churches. But when we see that evangelism is also a part, though apparently secondary, of its work, it is evident that it is not just a secular organization, but a church, in the sense of an organization of professing Christians.

F. A. Mayer, in *The Religious Bodies of America* observes: “it seems that ecumenical theology views the function of the Church largely in terms of the Calvinistic theocentric emphasis on Christ’s universal kingdom, namely, that the Church must remedy the disorder of society. This disorder is due to the crises of our age as they come to the surface in the clash between capitalism and labor, in the unequal distribution of the world’s goods, in the social and economic insecurity, and similar situations. The Church must resolve the resultant tensions by freeing mankind from racial prejudices and by bringing about a full recognition of the worth of the individual.”

The Ecumenical Movement would want the churches in unity to work toward peace, tranquility, and prosperity on earth, so that the conditions might be more conducive to the Gospel. The Lord’s instruction to His Church, on the other hand, is to preach the Gospel to every creature and as hearts are changed the lives and morals will also be changed. In general the Ecumenical Movement puts a one-sided emphasis on “this world” and too often overlooks the fact that we are but strangers and pilgrims here, that we have no abiding city here, but seek one to come.

And so riding on this three-wheeled cart—union vital, unity unnecessary, and deeds over creeds—the Ecumenical Movement has set a dizzying and ever-increasing pace in the past 50 years, exercising a tremendous influence on the Christian churches in the world. Not all who are involved in this movement, individuals or churches, embrace it in its entirety or with the same degree of enthusiasm. What has been described is the Ecumenical Movement in the ideal. But there is not a single denomination in which there is not evident one or more of the characteristics of this movement.

The visible result has been church unions—mergers within denominations, mergers across denominational lines and national and international federations and cooperative agencies.

Before trying to reunite churches professing opposite doctrines it was necessary to reconcile to some degree those having the same origin and similar theology. In a large measure this was the work of the second half of the 19th century, even before ecumenism took on the form of a “movement.” It was this period that produced the Synodical Conference when the Synods of Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the Norwegian Synod found themselves to be in doctrinal agreement and united. Similar unions took place in other denominations where agreement was found.

However, with the coming of the twentieth century and the Ecumenical Movement, mergers did not stop with those of like origin or confession. When the spirit of doctrinal indifference and unity for the sake of cooperation began to prevail, hitherto unthought of mergers took place.

We have neither the time nor the space to list them all, nor could we thereby hope to create anything but confusion in your minds. Permit us, however, to trace the merger history of one of these bodies to demonstrate the devastating effect of unionism, the result when truth and error are compromised. This body is presently known as the United Church of Christ and it has many congregations in our District. Its history of union without unity goes back to the Prussian Union of 1817. In that year, the third centennial of the Reformation, King Frederick William III of Prussia, a Calvinist, ordered the merger of all Lutheran and Reformed Christians in his domain. Over ninety percent of the people in Prussia and Brandenburg were still Lutheran in 1817. But the rationalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century had taken its toll. Therefore, because of the prevailing indifference to doctrine, many of the people submitted to the royal orders. A minority, however, refused to do so, preferring to suffer the King’s displeasure rather than to deny their faith. The majority continued at least theoretically either as Lutherans or as Reformed under one state authority. This combination of conflicting faiths is known as the Prussian Union to which we have already referred in our opening remarks.

The Evangelical Synod of North America, founded in 1840 near St. Louis, Missouri, may be regarded as a daughter of the Prussian Union. This body succeeded where King Frederick William III failed, for it actually

merged the beliefs of Lutherans and Calvinists by accepting the creeds of both where they agreed and by ignoring the points where they disagreed. Thus the Augsburg Confession, Luther's Catechism, and the Calvinistic Heidelberg Catechism constituted its doctrinal standard insofar as they agree. The catechism used for confirmation instruction was a combination of Luther's Small Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism. For a time there was a strong Lutheran current running through the religious instruction of the Evangelical Synod. Many of its churches called themselves Lutheran. In order to encourage Lutherans to join their churches, some Evangelical pastors tried to convince Lutherans that their churches were Lutheran. But the leaven of falsehood had been at work and doctrinal indifference eventually weakened the confessional consciousness of the Evangelical Synod to a point where this body was ready to merge with the liberal Reformed Church in the United States under the name "The Evangelical and Reformed Church." This union took place in 1934 with the Heidelberg Catechism, Luther's Small Catechism, and now the Melancthon's altered Augsburg Confession as doctrinal basis.

The Evangelical and Reformed Church granted every congregation and minister utmost liberty in interpreting Scripture and so prepared the way for the next merger with the even more liberal General Council of Congregational and Christian Churches, where Unitarianism had gained a foothold. Negotiations between these two bodies began in 1944 and was consummated when the United Church of Christ became a reality in 1957.

But in the Ecumenical Movement there is no stopping until total union is achieved. And so the new United Church of Christ is already engaged in discussions with the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., the Protestant Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Church in an effort to bring these four denominations into one large church. This is the so-called Blake-Pike proposal having been proposed by Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, a Presbyterian and Bishop James A. Pike, and Episcopalian. This is the same James A. Pike who "cannot repeat the Apostles' Creed, because, as he has explained, he cannot accept the virgin birth, the ascension, and the Heavenly intercession of Christ" (*Northwestern Lutheran*, Volume 49, No. 13, p. 204). This is blatant unbelief and all who embrace the one who holds it in Christian fellowship make themselves guilty of this same unbelief.

This is the history of what once began as a Lutheran church body almost one hundred and fifty years ago. Today there is not the slightest trace of Lutheranism in this body. What once was a fairly conservative, Bible-teaching church has become thoroughly modernistic. Unionism has taken its toll—unionism, the favorite tool of the Ecumenical Movement. And this pattern of the church just mentioned has been followed in many Christian denominations all over the world.

Even more universal in scope than the mergers of denominations has been the creation of national and international federations of churches. There is today hardly a nation which does not have its own National Council of Churches. The National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. we have mentioned earlier. It was formed in 1950 by 29 Protestant and Orthodox churches as a successor to the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America and various other inter-church agencies. Today, 33 denominations (with nearly 40 million church members) are members of the Council. Thirty-three denominations, different from one another in doctrine and practice, yet joining together to do church-work. This is unionism in its crassest form. Here every form of doctrine is tolerated as truth. Here the modernist who denies that the Bible is God's Word and relegates the miracles of Christ to the realm of myths, can dwell side by side with the fundamentalist who believes the Bible as it stands, and in fact is respected for his convictions. Here St. Paul's warning, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers," and his stern admonition, "Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord," (II Cor. 6:14-17) goes unheeded. How is this possible? This is the Ecumenical Movement in action. Its cost is high. At stake is the truth of God's Word.

Once the Ecumenical Movement had made church union and cooperation easy, it was only a matter of time before there developed international agencies in which the churches could coordinate their efforts and their activities. The phalanx of such international organizations, the embodiment of the Ecumenical Movement, is the World Council of Churches which just last year was in the headlines as a result of its Third Assembly at New Delhi, India. Represented were 197 member churches from 60 different countries.

Although the WCC did not actually become a reality until 1948 in its first assembly at Amsterdam, its beginnings go back to 1910 and the World Conference of Missions at Edinburgh. Convened primarily to provide information about Christian missions and to stimulate popular interest, there evolved out of this Conference three separate branches. They were the International Missionary Council made up of organizations and churches which desired to coordinate their efforts at mission work, the “Life and Work” Movement supported by those who wanted to take more aggressive cooperative action regarding the practical issues of society and the contemporary problems of the world, and the “Faith and Order” Movement emphasizing the need for discussion of the doctrinal disagreements underlying the disunity of Christendom. For a time each group went in its own direction. The “Life and Work” Movement became particularly active during the days before the first world war when it sought to preserve the peace. But all its efforts to prevent hostilities were in vain and it was not until after the war, in 1925, that the first conference on “Life and Work” was convened at Stockholm, Sweden. The supporters of the movement for united action without any attempt at theological agreement, finally organized into the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, in which many Protestant and some Orthodox churches then joined efforts at social reform and world improvement.

Meanwhile the followers of the “Faith and Order” Movement, unwilling to accept the theory that no theological basis was necessary, had their own gatherings, and at Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1927, assembled as the first World Conference on Faith and Order. They were bent on ironing out all the differences and difficulties in the doctrines of the churches.

By 1937, however, the Life and Work Council had come to realize that it could not operate without some theological discussion, while the Conference on Faith and Order felt a need for action. The natural consequence was the resolution to join these two streams, both having as their goal an organization to include all Christian denominations. However, before this resolution could be put into action a second world conflict between the nations interrupted. And so eleven years passed before the two separate streams became one in the World Council of Churches.

If we were to ask which movement won out, “Faith and Order” with its insistence on some type of doctrinal basis, or “Life and Work” with its insistence on joint action without mention of doctrine, we would have to say it was a compromise. “Life and Work” agreed to the following doctrinal basis for the new World Council: “The WCC is a fellowship of churches that accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior.” But the proponents of “Faith and Order” could hardly have considered this a victory, for it left the door wide open for every false doctrine that has ever been promulgated in the church. And, impossible as it may seem, there were some who objected to this statement as too narrow.

Since its first assembly at Amsterdam in 1948, the WCC has assembled again at Evanston in 1954 and at New Delhi in 1961. Each time its membership has increased and the ultimate goal is inclusion of all Christian churches.

It should be said that at its latest assembly the doctrinal basis of the WCC was altered to include a reference to the Scriptures and the Trinity. While this formula sounds better to our ears it is still vague and ambiguous. And the fact of the matter is that a wolf is not any less dangerous in sheep’s clothing. The false doctrines rampant in many member churches remain unchanged.

At the last Assembly the International Missionaries Council also became an integral part of the WCC so that the three streams having their source at Edinburgh in 1910, “Faith and Order,” “Life and Word,” and Missions, have become one.

With the acceptance of 23 new member churches at the New Delhi Assembly the number of Protestant churches on the outside has diminished considerably. And we would not even want to suggest that the WCC has reached its maximum membership. There is bound to be ever more complete participation as the waves of the Ecumenical Movement keep battering at the dikes which have so far held firm. Ultimately the WCC seeks the Roman Catholic Church also as one of its members. Invitations have been extended. Certainly its doctrinal basis is wide enough to include Catholicism.

Meanwhile the movement has also had its effect on that body. As mentioned, an Ecumenical Council is scheduled for the Vatican this year. The softening process may have begun and as the world conditions become ever more critical the great reunion may not be as distant as one might suppose. Rome would of course view this as a return of the stray sheep.

But imagine for a moment one great universal organization including all Christendom, purporting to be the visible body of Christ. Does that sound like the “little flock” of which Jesus speaks when He says, “fear not little flock, for it is your father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32)? No matter how large the WCC becomes, no matter how many churches it includes and how many professing Christians it represents, it will still remain true that “many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 20:16), that “strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matt. 7:13). It will not change the Holy Christian Church one iota. The Body of Christ will ever remain the invisible congregation of all true believers. But the flagrant disregard for God’s Word manifested in the formation of the WCC, all in the name of Christendom, cannot but bring us nearer to that day of which Jesus said, ‘When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?’”

And so having examined some of the basic principles of the Ecumenical Movement, and having seen its influence on the Christian churches in general and in the formation of the World Council of Churches in particular, we arrive at our final observation that the Ecumenical Movement has also left its mark on Lutheranism in America.

III

The Ecumenical Movement has Left its Mark on Lutheranism in America

The Immediate and obvious effect of the Ecumenical Movement upon the Lutheran Churches, as on all other denominations, is a change in organizational groupings. The other effect, not always so readily recognized or admitted, but no less real, is a change in its confessional attitude. At the rise of covering some of the same ground which was covered in an essay before this District in 1958 we would like to briefly review the change in organizational groupings of the Lutheran Churches, conscious now that this has not been something peculiar to the Lutheran Churches, but part and parcel of a world-wide movement toward union.

By 1910 Lutheranism in America had been organized along some very definite lines. “The member Synods of the Synodical Conference stood for a genuine acceptance of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession without reservation. On the other hand, the older General Synod through its lax position came very near to a complete rejection of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. Then there was the General Council, whose position continued to be one of riding the fence, since it did not express itself clearly on the “four points” (Chiliasm, Altar fellowship, Pulpit fellowship, and Secret Societies). The Ohio Synod had left the Synodical Conference in the Election Controversy, persisting in its false views on election and conversion, as had also the Norwegian Synod. The Iowa Synod held to its unscriptural view on open questions. Similarly the Buffalo Synod continued to hold its old errors on the church and the ministry. There were besides these, the Augustana Synod and various other smaller bodies of Norwegian and Finnish descent.

In general the picture of Lutheranism in America had become rather fixed with each Synod setting forth its own doctrinal position. It seemed indeed that this might remain the picture of Lutheranism in America, a divided denomination, since the several Synods all claimed Scriptural basis for their position.

But then came the Ecumenical Movement with its relentless drive toward union and its willingness to sacrifice truth in favor of action. The result was a complete change in the picture of Lutheranism in America.

Without going into great detail we would like to mention the mergers of Lutheran bodies in America which have taken place within the lifetime of many present here today.

1917—Three larger bodies of Norwegian Lutherans—Hauge’s Norwegian Ev. Lutheran Synod in America, the Norwegian Synod, and the United Norwegian Lutheran Church of America, united to form the

Evangelical Lutheran Church, the ELC. Several smaller Norwegian groups, including our brethren of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, remained separate from this union.

1918—The United Lutheran Church of America, the ULCA, resulted from a merger of the Old General Synod, the General Council, and the United Synod of the South.

1918—Formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other states which previously had been only a federation of the Synods of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan.

1918—Organization of the National Lutheran Council, the NLC. The church bodies that officially ratified this organization were the United Lutheran Church, the Norwegian Lutheran Church, the Augustana Synod, the United Danish Church, the Lutheran Free Church, the Danish Lutheran Church, the Icelandic Synod, and the Buffalo Synod.

1930—The Joint Synod of Ohio, the Iowa Synod, and the Buffalo Synod became the American Lutheran Church, the ALC.

1930—The two-month-old American Lutheran Church (ALC) joined with the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC), the Augustana Synod, the United Evangelical Lutheran Church (UELC), and the Lutheran Free Church in a federation called the American Lutheran Conference.

1961—The Synods comprising the American Lutheran Conference, with the exception of the Augustana Lutheran Church, merged to form The American Lutheran Church commonly called TALC.

1962—The United Lutheran Church, the Augustana Ev. Lutheran Church, and the American Evangelical Lutheran Church became the Lutheran Church in America (LCA).

The Lutheran churches which have been involved in some type of merger in the past 50 years include virtually every Lutheran body in America with the exception of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. However, this isolation will also apparently soon be broken. For in its convention this past summer the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod adopted a resolution favoring the formation of a federation for all Lutheran bodies in America.

This quick review of the past 50 years certainly makes one thing clear: the Ecumenical Movement, the relentless drive toward union, has had its effect upon the organizational groupings of Lutheranism in America, so that Synods once numbering in the 60's have been reduced to just a handful.

In this we would sincerely like to rejoice, for we surely feel a strong bond between ourselves and fellow-Lutherans. However, we dare not fail to note a change in Lutheranism which goes far deeper than its change in organizational groupings, and that is a change in its confessionalism.

The Lutheran Church is by virtue of its birthright a confessional church. Think of Luther and his uncompromising stand on the Scriptures, "Sola Scriptura" was his motto, which has now been abandoned by most of Lutheranism, or at least emptied of its meaning. Luther was always ready, in unambiguous language, to say what he believed on the basis of the Bible. And he did not hesitate to condemn what was contrary to the Word of God. Before the Diet of Worms in 1521 Luther stood alone against pope and emperor, but squarely on the Word of God. When told to recant things he had said and written against the Roman church, he replied, "unless you can show me from the Scriptures, I will not, nor can I recant."

This same type of confessionalism is evident also in the Book of Concord, which the true Lutherans made their confession in 1581. There in the Creeds, Luther's Catechisms, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and the Formula of Concord the truth of God's Word is clearly and uncompromisingly set forth. Most important, there is no hedging on the matters in controversy. They are met head-on. The truth is set forth with ample Scriptural backing, and the contrary doctrine is rejected as false and contrary to the Word of God.

Such clear-cut confessionalism is today hardly to be found in the Lutheran Church in America. The Lutheran Church in America has by and large become unwilling or unable to confess the truth in clear and unmistakable terms. The Spirit of ecumenism has gained entry and has done its spiritual damage. The Lutheran Church in America has become tolerant of error in its relation to other denominations, in its relation to other Lutheran bodies, and in its dealing with errorists within.

The National Council of Churches, which we have seen to be completely unionistic, whose membership roster lists Methodists, Baptists, Armenians, Disciples, Moravians, Presbyterians, Protestant Episcopalians, Orthodox, Seventh Day Adventists, and many others, claims as members also the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the United Lutheran Church in America. The World Council of Churches' roster shows much the same range in membership, only on a world-wide scale. And virtually all Lutheran bodies in America, with the exception of the Synods comprising the Synodical Conference, have affiliated with this body either directly or indirectly, through membership in the National Lutheran Council or the Lutheran World Federation. How is one to understand the reasoning of those Lutherans who oppose membership in the World Council of Churches as unionistic, and yet consent to belong to the Lutheran World Federation which is affiliated with the WCC?

It should be obvious, however, that in its affiliations with other Christian denominations in which all shades of error are tolerated and taught, the Lutheran churches are making themselves guilty of that same error and sacrificing their confessionalism. Those who argue, "just think what a powerful influence for good we can be in the WCC if only we would not hide our light under a bushel, but join in with them and bring our testimony to them," must remember that confessional Lutheran testimony includes, if it is honest, a forthright condemnation of all sectarians and errorists. It is inconceivable that such testimony against fellow members of the Council would be tolerated in the WCC. It would more than likely result in the expulsion of the Lutherans.

Yet, Dr. Ralph H. Long, formerly Executive Director of the National Lutheran Council, said with regard to this: "We believe that the World Council will be a better balanced organization, if it has strong confessional groups within its ranks, than if it is made up of those who have little regard for confessional standards. There must be a proper and dignified respect for the confessional position of all the churches in the ecumenical group, and this can best be accomplished by each denomination presenting a united front. We are definitely in favor of the ecumenical progress that has been made and we want it to result in the strongest organization possible. This can result only from real honesty and a genuine purpose to cultivate a due respect for the right of each communion to adhere to and propagate its own confession. Through a common approach and a united front the Lutheran Church will be able to make a positive and worthwhile contribution to this world-wide movement of evangelical churches."

"A due respect for the right of each communion to adhere to and propagate its own confession." In other words, scriptural or unscriptural, both must be respected. This, we submit, is not confessional Lutheranism in any sense of the word. It is unionism. To hear some of the statements of present-day Lutheran theologians would make Melancthon seem like an ultra-conservative by comparison.

The plea that these are only cooperative agencies for cooperation in externals we have seen earlier to be unacceptable. Membership in these national and international bodies is toleration of error. And well might those involved bear in mind the inevitable path of unionism: first toleration of error, then granting error equal right with truth, and finally error gaining supremacy.

The confessionalism of Lutheranism in America has grown dim also in the relation of Lutheran bodies to one another. When the General Synod, the General Council, and the United Synod of the South merged to form the United Lutheran Church in America in 1918, the old differences, which had formerly caused these groups to separate, were not removed. There was no admission on the part of the General Synod that it had been too liberal in the past and that it would steer a more conservative course in the future. Nor did the General Council admit that it might have been too demanding. There was simply a weariness of discussing the differences, a consensus to forget about them and live together. That was compromise action, not confessional action. The same is true of the brand new merger into the LCA. Differences were forgotten and truth and error permitted to exist side by side. However, considering the background of the Synods forming the ULCA, perhaps this was to be expected.

The same confessional laxity is evident also in the formation of the American Lutheran Church in 1930. The Ohio Synod was willing to give up its claim to verbal inspiration and settle for the Iowa Synod's "open questions." Truth was mixed with error and the result was not half truth and half error, but complete error, for

the resulting American Lutheran Church was ready to state its conviction that “it is neither necessary nor possible to agree on all non-fundamental doctrines.” The leaven always spreads where it is tolerated. Today there are evident in the ALC all the old errors of Ohio, the Iowa, and the Buffalo Synods.

Most obvious and most distressing and disheartening is the decline of the confessional stature of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Here is a body which was staunchly confessional if ever there was one. In its early days when the hardship and privation of a new continent must have made union with other Lutheran bodies appear particularly desirable, Walther and his followers never wavered from their confessional position. It was this staunch confessionalism which proved to be a supporting pillar for our own Synod in its formative days, and finally led to the joining of forces in the Synodical Conference.

When in the 1840’s and 1850’s the Buffalo Synod adhered to a false conception of the church and the ministry, defining the church as “the visible gathering of the believers” and denying the keys to individual Christians, Dr. Walther defended the Scriptural position “that the church is essentially invisible, that the ministerial office is simply the spiritual priesthood that belongs to all Christians and is transferred to an individual by the call of the congregation. He insisted that ordination is wholly a human institution which serves only as a public confirmation of this transfer” (Wentz, p. 210). There was no yielding on this point even though it made union with the Buffalo Synod impossible. This was confessional soundness.

When in the 1850’s and 1860’s the Missouri Synod and the Iowa Synod were exploring the possibility of union the Iowa Synod insisted on “open questions.” “Iowa from the very beginning, acted according to the principle that in matters of faith it is essential to agree in case church fellowship is to take place, but that doctrinal points, which are not doctrines of faith, must not affect fellowship of faith and church fellowship. They must be considered ‘open questions.’ Missouri rejected this distinction, and demanded complete agreement and unity concerning every doctrine taken from the Scriptures. Such unity was declared to be an absolute prerequisite for church fellowship. One and only one interpretation would be permitted by the church, lest she prove disloyal to the Word of God by tolerating two interpretations at the same time. The principle that there are such open questions was described by Missouri ‘as a most dangerous . . . and unionistic poison’” (Neve, p. 202). It was only a little leaven, this matter of open questions, but it was not allowed, for Missouri was confessionally strong and Scripturally sound.

That this little leaven had far-reaching consequences became evident when the Iowa Synod placed into this category such questions as the anti-Christ, the doctrine of Sunday, Chiliasm, etc. Because she had taken a Scriptural position on the original question, Missouri was able to hold firm on these points too.

In the great controversy on Predestination and Conversion in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century the Missouri Synod never wavered from the “sola gratia,” contending in clear-cut confessional statements that a man’s salvation is entirely due to the grace of God, that those who are saved have been chosen by God and because of this election are brought to faith. This gave all glory to God for a man’s salvation.

The Ohio Synod and a group in the Norwegian Synod, on the other hand, explained God’s election as taking place in view of man’s faith. They argued that if one takes Lutheran teachings as a whole and Scriptural teachings as a whole the teaching is clear that God elects a man to salvation “in view of the faith” he foresees in the man. To the question why some are converted and not others, they answered, because some willfully resist God’s grace while others “do not willfully resist, but let God’s work be done on themselves.”

Again, it seemed to many then, as it does to many now, a trivial point. And yet the Missouri Synod saw in this a weakening of the “sola gratia.” If God’s election depended on man’s faith it did not give all glory to God. If man contributed even so much to his conversion as to refrain from willful resistance, then it was not by grace alone. Unflinchingly, on the basis of clear passages of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions the Missouri Synod took her own stand even though it meant severance of fellowship first by the Ohio Synod and later by a large portion of the Norwegian Synod.

Thus the entire early history of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is characterized by confessional soundness, willingness to take a definite stand on the Scriptures and to reject all contrary teachings.

This same confessional soundness she also manifested in the first decades of the twentieth century. There was no yielding or toleration of error. Out of this spirit of confessionalism came the “Brief Statement” in 1931. In view of repeated failures at arriving at doctrinal unity with the Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo synods, the Missouri Synod appointed a committee to prepare a statement, which, beginning with the controversial issues, was to present the doctrines of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. The result of this formulation was the Brief Statement, accepted as its doctrinal position by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1932. Here was one more example of sound confessional Lutheranism by the Missouri Synod. No controversial issue was sidestepped or avoided. With language so clear and simple it could not be misunderstood, the true doctrines of God’s Word were set forth and false doctrines rejected. There was no evidence that the Ecumenical Movement with its pressure for union without full unity and its emphasis on deeds instead of creeds had made any in-roads in Missouri.

But not many years after the Brief Statement appeared a change became evident. After 50 years of fruitless conversation and efforts to win the Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo Synods to the Scriptural position on the doctrines in controversy, the Missouri Synod in 1935 accepted still another invitation from these bodies, by then joined into the ALC.

The Missouri Synod, quite naturally, presented its Brief Statement, for it clearly stated its position on the points at issue. Naturally this was not acceptable to the ALC, for it rejected its teachings on election, conversion, the anti-Christ, etc. However, the ecumenical spirit was evident when the ALC solved this dilemma by presenting its “Declaration” in which it set forth its own understanding of the touchy issues. The American Lutheran Church then declared itself willing to accept the Brief Statement “in the light of” its own “Declaration.” This meant nothing else than that the Missouri Synod could retain its position and point to the Brief Statement and the ALC could retain its position and point to the Brief Statement too, to be understood, however, in the light of its own “Declaration.”

This was anything but confessionalism. This was compromise which could only lead to confusion. And yet the Missouri Synod in 1938 was ready, with only slight reservations, to accept this compromise package, the Brief Statement and the “Declaration,” “as the doctrinal basis for future church-fellowship.” Even though for various reasons this union was not consummated, we cannot help but feel that here the ecumenical camel got his nose into the tent.

However, the confessional spirit in Missouri once more came to the fore and loud protests were heard throughout the synod at this apparent compromise. Most urgent was the insistence that there would have to be one doctrinal statement to which both groups could subscribe unreservedly, not two documents, one to be understood in the light of the other.

The resultant effort was the “Doctrinal Affirmation” in which the Brief Statement of the Missouri Synod and the “Declaration” of the American Lutheran Church were combined into one document. That the fundamental differences had never actually been settled became evident when the “Doctrinal Affirmation” was rejected by Missouri as “not definite and precise enough to preclude the possibility of misunderstanding” and by the ALC because it sounded too much like the Brief Statement.

At the same time the ALC reaffirmed its conviction that precise doctrinal agreement is not necessary for church union, by saying that there is “an allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion on the basis of the teachings of the Word of God.” It even called it “a threat to evangelical liberty of conscience” to make a unified statement of doctrine an absolute condition of fellowship (*Friendly Invitation*, 1947). This claim is made despite St. Paul’s admonition: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Cor. 1:10).

It would seem that at this point it should have been obvious that the ALC was not about to change its doctrinal position, merely looking for some way of uniting with Missouri while retaining its old errors. At the same time it was negotiating with other even more liberal Lutheran bodies seeking unity with them. The ALC was practicing what the Ecumenical Movement preaches, union without true unity.

Meanwhile the liberal trend of the Missouri Synod leadership became even more evident when at the 1944 convention it adopted a definition of prayer-fellowship, contrary to all its earlier pronouncements, which opened the door for a wide range of unionistic practices. The new definition read: "Joint prayer at intersynodical conferences, asking God for His guidance and blessing upon the deliberations and discussions of His Word, does not militate against the resolution of the Fort Wayne Convention (1941), provided such prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error." The Fort Wayne resolution forbade "pulpit, altar and prayer fellowship with the ALC" until all matters in controversy had been settled.) Thus it abandoned its traditional position that pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship with errorists constitutes in itself a "denial of the truth and support of error" whether those concerned realize it or not.

Then in 1945 the Missouri Synod was rocked when 44 pastors and professors, many of whom held high positions of leadership, signed the so-called "Chicago Statement." This was a document which further weakened the bulwarks against unionism and laid down unscriptural principles of church fellowship. It stated, for example, "We affirm our conviction. . .that fellowship is possible without complete agreement in details of doctrine and practice which have never been considered divisive in the Lutheran Church." It said further, "We. . .deplore the fact that Romans 16:17,18 has been applied to all Christians who differ from us in certain points of doctrine. It is our conviction, based on sound exegetical and hermeneutical principles that this text does not apply to the present situation in the Lutheran Church of America."

Although many voices were raised in protest against this new trend in Missouri, the signers were never required to retract their Statement nor was discipline exercised over against them. The "Chicago Statement" was merely withdrawn from discussion according to an agreement between the Presidency and the signers. Truth and error were permitted to exist side by side, agreeing to live together. But we have seen earlier that error always contaminates the truth. They cannot live together.

By this time the old confessionalism had been so weakened that the Missouri Synod was ready to join the Synods of the National Lutheran Council in joint welfare and joint armed service work. It was ready to do church work together with bodies with which it had never found it possible to have fellowship on Scriptural grounds. Here another characteristic of the Ecumenical Movement became evident, union for the sake of joint work in welfare and social problems.

It was no surprise then when the Common Confession appeared in 1950 and was proclaimed a settlement of the past differences between the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the Synods comprising the American Lutheran Church. In reality it was not a settlement, just another compromise. It spoke clearly and distinctly on those doctrines where there had always been agreement. But the issues that had been in controversy for over 60 years were either expressed in ambiguous language or omitted entirely. Where the Brief Statement had succeeded in exposing the errors in the other bodies, the Common Confession succeeded in concealing them, and permitting them to stand. Such a document was to the liking of the ALC with its principle that full agreement is not necessary or possible and it came as no surprise when the Common Confession was adopted without dissenting vote in the ALC. More surprising and most revealing of confessional laxity and the ecumenical spirit was the action of the Missouri Synod adopting the Common Confession as a settlement of all the points of doctrine treated in it.

To be sure, there were strong protests, not only from other Synods of the Synodical Conference, but from many within the Missouri Synod. The protests were silenced with the Common Confession, Part II, and it was only the decision of the ALC to join in the formation of the aforementioned TALC with other more liberal Lutheran bodies which prevented the Common Confession from serving as a basis for union between it and the Missouri Synod. This action in itself should have been proof positive that the ALC had not left its former position.

But the ecumenical spirit is eternally optimistic. And meetings with the NLC representatives, the National Lutheran Education Conference, the Conference of Lutheran Professors of Theology, all with unionistic devotions and prayer, have continued. There is no sign, except in isolated groups, of a return to the confessionalism of the Missouri fathers who said clearly and plainly on the basis of the Scripture, there can be

no union without unity; there can be no demonstration of fellowship when there is no doctrinal agreement. Even less is there any evidence of a return to confessional Lutheranism on the part of the Synods now comprising the LCA and TALC.

Since 1938 there has developed a confessional laxity also in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. In the efforts at union since then there is evidence of the effect of the Ecumenical Movement. All characteristics are present, be they ever so faint: the relentless drive toward union, undaunted and undampened by failure, the willingness to compromise and in doing so tolerate error, and, especially in the agreements with the NLC, stress on social and moral problems.

The confessional laxity which has steadily increased in American Lutheranism, as a result of the Ecumenical Movement, is also evident in the failure to discipline those within her midst who have deviated from the doctrine of the Scripture. Those who deny the Genesis account of creation, as we have always understood it, those who contend that the Bible is full of “myths” and must be demythologized, those who question the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead are all permitted to hold their false views and remain Lutherans in good standing. But where the willingness to take a stand against false doctrine in other church bodies has disappeared, there disciplinary action against error within a body itself is also gone.

This then is the sad, and rather obvious effect of the Ecumenical Movement on Lutheranism in America—confessional laxity. There are those who hail this as a giant stride in the right direction, who rejoice that the Lutherans are finally coming out of their confessional shell. The editors of *Dialog*, in evaluating the essays of the Missouri Synod in conversations with the NLC, are happy to report: “What is noteworthy is that in the essays of the representatives of the Missouri Synod the more ecumenical spirit of the faculty in St. Louis, which for some years has been at odds with the official isolationism, has succeeded in making itself heard through professors who are usually held to be safely orthodox” (*Dialog*, Vol. I, p. 14).

This same journal, in announcing the rupture of fellowship between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods says: “it was no secret that, among other things, the Wisconsin Synod had been a drag on Missouri’s moves toward ecumenical participation”. . . “The frustration of the Wisconsin Synod leaders is certainly understandable when one notices how their correct intuition of a changing attitude in Missouri was repeatedly answered by paternalistic denials or by apparently deliberate attempts to slant or suppress the evidence. While the tactical skill of Missouri’s leaders did delay the final break, it did not prevent it” (*Dialog*, Vol. I, p. 70).

“A changing attitude in Missouri,” “the more ecumenical spirit of the faculty in St. Louis”—the editors of *Dialog* noticed it and express no regrets.

This then is the Ecumenical Movement and its effect on Lutheranism in America. Someone has aptly said the centrifugal force of the Reformation which drove Christians apart in many directions has been reversed and the centripetal force of the Ecumenical Movement is driving them all together again. When this movement has run its course there will be but one Christian Church on earth. Perhaps this prophecy is true, perhaps not. Only time will tell.

But what about our own Wisconsin Synod in relation to this world-wide movement? In the news item referred to at the beginning of this paper, in which the Religious Highlights of 1961 were recounted and all the church-mergers reviewed, the following was also included: “Milwaukee became the center of a counter-unity movement, when the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod after more than 20 years of meetings, sermons, essays and theological colloquies, voted to sever relations in the Synodical Conference with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod because of disagreement in doctrine.”

The outward characteristics of the Ecumenical Movement have not yet manifested themselves in the official action of our Synod. But who would want to hazard a guess whether the spirit of ecumenism is already present? The Ecumenical Movement is a part of the world in which we live and like the air all about us we are constantly exposed to it.

Certainly the temptation to “join the crowd” will not decrease. On the contrary, the ecumenical appeals will become stronger. If it is our God-appointed destiny to stand in opposition to this world-wide movement, then He alone can give us the strength and the courage to do so. And let no one imagine that this is the easy

path, that isolation and separation is the simple choice. Everything human within us rebels against such an unpopular position. And who does not sometimes feel himself weakening in the face of tremendous emotional appeals? The spirit of ecumenism is one to which one could easily become addicted. As one breathes its sweet, sentimental vapors there is danger of losing one's sense of values and overthrowing basic principles.

We on our part are convinced that to embrace the Ecumenical Movement either in whole or in part would ultimately require sacrificing our conviction that the Bible is the verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God, it must be verbally inspired and inerrant, a truth to which the Scriptures themselves also testify, then it follows that we must look upon every deviation from the Scriptural teaching as error to be avoided. Whether the particular doctrine in question happens to be one which has to do with salvation or creation, with a fundamental doctrine or a non-fundamental doctrine, if it stands written in the Bible, then it is God's Word and dare not be questioned, contradicted, or adjusted to human reason.

This is of course completely contrary to the spirit of ecumenism which is tolerant of all teachings be they Scriptural or not, just so one basic truth is upheld, namely, that Jesus is God and Lord. And this can be understood as each sees fit.

And because we are persuaded that the Bible is "God-Speaking-To-Us" we are also prepared to listen to His instruction regarding the fellowship which we are to practice in this world. And certainly it has been amply and ably demonstrated in the fellowship thesis of our Synod that the Scriptures instruct us to be guided by two Christian principles in the exercise of Church-fellowship, the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the weak brother on the one hand, and to avoid those who adhere to false doctrine and practice and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds on the other. Thus God in His Word instructs and it is not for us to say, "but it would be better to act in a different manner." Or "think of all the good we could do if we would not avoid." When God speaks in His Word, that is final. And as dear children of God we gladly submit our rebellious wills.

And so when we follow these directions of the Lord and avoid persistently erring church bodies we are not thereby denying the Christianity of anyone. That is the Lord's business. We are simply following the Lord's bidding and testifying in love to our neighbor, "You have departed from God's Word. And since talking has not won you to the truth, God has told us to bring this to your attention in the most earnest way possible, by refraining from fellowship with you." Such action hurts, but it is done in love and obedience.

Again this is completely contrary to the ecumenical spirit which says if we get together we can iron out all differences, but first we must get together. Nothing can be gained by separation.

And because we are certain that the Bible is the Word of God we are also certain that it alone can serve as a unifying force to bring about true unity. Joint action and joint endeavors may bring about a unity of interest and a unity of effort, but only the Word of God can bring about a unity of spirit and a unity of faith, for it is through the Word that the Holy Spirit kindles and keeps faith in the hearts of men. Only the union that is built on the Word of God is true and enduring union, for outward organizations pass away, yes, heaven and earth shall pass away, but, God says, "My Word shall not pass away."

The first Christian congregation, the Jerusalem congregation after Pentecost, might be called ecumenical in the modern sense of the word, outwardly one. And of this congregation we are told "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayer," (Acts 2:42). That was God-pleasing fellowship where all continued in the apostles' doctrine. There was fellowship that of necessity manifested itself in the joint breaking of bread and prayer. This is the type of unity for which our heart longs and for which we must constantly strive. But this unity can be achieved only if it rests on the Word of God, on the doctrines of the apostles.

In closing Luther has a word of advice for us 20th century Christians who may be inclined to weaken over against the pressure for union at the expense of God's Word. He says: "The blessing of the Word is so great that no human heart can comprehend it. This is why its retention requires a stout, stiff battle. Even then it is easy to lose it forever if we do not hold to the Word with all our might. By no means is the Word to be considered as lightly as the world considers it, and as some foolish spirits, deceived by the devil in regard to the

Sacrament or other heresies, represent it to be. They tell us that one is not to quarrel so violently over one article and disrupt Christian love because of it. Nor should we consign one another to the devil because of it. But, they say, one might well yield and surrender a bit and keep up fraternal and Christian unity and fellowship with those who err in an unimportant point—as long as one agrees with them otherwise.”

“No, my good man,” says Luther, “for me none of that peace and unity one gains by the loss of God’s Word, for in that case eternal life and everything else would already be lost. In this matter we dare not budge or concede anything to please you or any man; but all things must yield to the Word, be they friendly or hostile. For the Word is given not in order to achieve external or secular unity and peace but life eternal. Word and doctrine are to create unity or fellowship. Where they are one and the same, the rest will naturally follow; if not, no unity will abide anyway. Therefore do not speak to me of love or friendship when anything is to be detracted from the Word or the faith; for we are told that not love but the Word brings eternal life, God’s grace, and all heavenly treasures. We will gladly keep the peace with them in an external way, as we should do with everybody in the world, even with our worst enemies. . .but in doctrine and Christian fellowship we want to have nothing to do with them. Nor do we want to consider them brethren. They are enemies, because they knowingly insist on their error; and we intend to fight against them in our spiritual struggle. Therefore nothing but satanic, seductive, and sinister strategy is involved when we are called upon to yield a bit and to connive at an error for the sake of unity. In this way the devil is trying cunningly to lead us away from the Word. For if we adopt this course and get together in this matter, he has already gained ground; and if we are to yield him a fingerbreadth, he would soon have an ell” (*What Luther Says*, Vol. III, no. 4546).

Luther, like St. Paul, would never fit into the modern Ecumenical Movement. His attitude toward Zwingli at Marburg would be viewed with horror. The ecumenist would say to Luther, “How can you refuse the hand of fellowship when you agree on every doctrine, save one?” Luther would answer, “It is my own experience that every passage makes the entire world too narrow for me” (*What Does Luther Say*, Vol. III, no. 4787).

May God always grant us faith to accept His Word like little children and may He grant us wisdom to detect all the cunning devices of the devil to undermine that faith! We can express our closing thoughts no better than they have been expressed in the prayer of Nicolaus Selnecker 350 years ago:

Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide,
For round us falls the eventide;
Nor let Thy Word, that heavenly light,
For us be ever veiled in night.

In these last days of sore distress
Grant us, dear Lord, true steadfastness
That pure we keep, till life is spent,
Thy holy Word and Sacrament.

Lord Jesus, help, Thy Church uphold,
For we are sluggish, thoughtless, cold.
Oh, prosper well Thy Word of grace
And spread its truth in every place!

O God, how sin’s dread works abound!
Throughout the earth no rest is found,
And falsehood’s spirit wide has spread,
And error boldly rears its head.

The haughty spirits, Lord, restrain
Who o'er Thy Church with might would reign
And always set forth something new,
Devised to change Thy doctrine true.

And since the cause and glory, Lord,
Are Thine, not ours, to us afford
Thy help and strength and constancy.
With all our heart we trust in Thee.

A trusty weapon is Thy Word,
Thy Church's buckler, shield, and sword.
Oh, let us in its power confide
That we may seek no other guide!

Oh, grant that in Thy holy Word
We here may live and die, dear Lord;
And when our journey endeth here,
Receive us into glory there. Amen. (Luth. Hymnal, 292)

Pastor D. F. Bitter