

Dwelling Together in Unity

As is evident, our Evangelical Church thus is composed of people of Lutheran and of Reformed inclination, but joined in that harmony of the spirit which the Psalmist commends to all in Psalm 133, "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" Nor is our union a cloaked disunion. We do not need to preserve a semblance of unity in our Church by muzzling our members or by throttling their consciences. Those of Lutheran inclination among us do not look askance at those of our people of Reformed inclination, and vice versa. Realizing that the differences are on points non-essential to salvation, we not only tolerate each other, but respect each other so much the more highly as we note the earnest endeavor of our fellows to find the truth. And while we do not encourage debate on the points of variance between the Lutheran and Reformed doctrine, we do not evade it where it can be entered and carried on in the truth-seeking spirit. For all things are ours: Paul and Peter, Luther and Zwingli, Melancthon and Calvin; but Christ is all in all. And in a spirit of unfeigned submission to the Word of God we hold to Christ above all and present to God and the world a people of single faith: Christ; of single purpose: The Kingdom of God; and of single principle: practical love to all men. Nothing could be plainer and simpler; nothing greater and more glorious.

And happy are we to note that these differences which once divided the Church in Europe are much less prominent today than they formerly were. For here in free America a new generation is growing up which has buried the arms of religious warfare. Nor are we busy about keeping their grave green. Let others invoke the thunder of God upon those who believe not as they would dictate, we would rather emulate the example and follow the precept of the sanctified John, whose exhortation is: "Little children love one another!" And what gratification to note that the Evangelical spirit has forged its way into wider field of activity, in that the efforts of many Christians all over the globe are today directed towards reaching that ground so long familiar to us, toleration and cooperation, in the cause of God.

May His kingdom come! An when eventually the grand day shall dawn on which the desire of Christ will be gratified, "Holy Father, keep them in Thy name which Thou hast given me that they may be one eye as we are" John 17:11, we believe, in all humility be it said, that the Evangelical Church in America will be counted among those forces that have helped to bring about this happy union of the hearts of all that love the Eternal Christ.

From Evangelical Fundamentals – Part 1

The Church of the Union

But while this froth appeared on the surface, there was a strong undercurrent of piety in the Church. The number was great of those who deplored the lamentable quarrel and hoped that God would soon effect that union for which many had prayed ever since the Reformation. Nor were there lacking those who endeavored to reconcile the old difference. But not till the year 1817 were any of these attempts successful. And then again, as at the conference at Marburg, it was not a theologian, who became the human instrument of God to bring the controversy to a close, but a pious, God-fearing king. It was Frederick William III of Prussia, whom God had selected for this office. Thus in the year 1817, the third centennial of the posting of the ninety-five theses by Luther on the church door at Wittenberg, Frederick William III of Prussia succeeded in bringing together a number of the most prominent preachers of his kingdom. Then a book of worship to be used in the Lutheran and Reformed Churches of the kingdom was compiled. And no sooner had the initial step been taken, than congregation after congregation joined the rapidly growing ranks of the Evangelical Church, for that was the name of the new Church. From principality to principality the movement spread, till soon the whole German empire had heard of it and its churches were to be found in most of the cities, villages and hamlets of the whole land.

Men and women wept with very joy that at last the Word of God was restored to its rightful position and the learned disquisitions and impassioned invectives of the so-called orthodox preachers were debarred from the pulpits.

And leaving the barren wastes of theological discussion, the Evangelical Church entered the much more promising, long neglected field of active service of God and the fellow men. The Church became a missionary Church. Foreign lands heard the good news of the Crucified One and the sheep from other folds were brought in one by one to the great Good Shepherd. Schools, hospitals, homes for the aged, orphan asylums and many other charitable institutions sprang up as testimonials to the active love of Christ, which recognized in every needy brother an opportunity to serve the Christ himself. Poetry, ever dear to the German heart, was again taken into the service of Christ, and hymns incomparable for depth of sentiment and beauty of form told of a love too great for ordinary speech. And no man will gainsay the statement that the Evangelical Church aided in saving the day for God's cause during the cynical, chilling time of rationalism just past!

The Principles of the Evangelical Church

But on what basis was the union effected? It was the Bible. The Bible, the revelation of God's goodness, was made the only arbiter of faith. Whatever was not taken from the Bible was esteemed as of little consequence, no matter how brilliant in conception or presentation. But scant attention was paid to the results of speculation and Christian philosophy. On the sure foundation of God's Word the Evangelical Church was grounded. These principles were brought over from Germany by our fore fathers. Though they left behind them home and fatherland, they took their faith, their dearest and most precious possession, with them. And in the land of the politically free they planted the Church of those whom Christ has by His truth made spiritually free, as the following declaration of principles, adopted at the organization of our beloved Evangelical Church in America, shows:

“The German Evangelical Synod of North America, as a part of the Evangelical Church, defines the term ‘Evangelical Church’ as denoting that branch of the Christian Church which acknowledges the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the Word of God, the sole and infallible guide of faith and life, and accepts the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures as given in the symbolic books of the Lutheran and Reformed Church, the most important being: The Augsburg Confession, Luther's and the Heidelberg Catechisms, in so far as they agree; but where they disagree the German Evangelical Synod of North America adheres strictly to the passages of Holy Scriptures bearing on the subject, and avails itself of the liberty of conscience prevailing in the Evangelical Church.”

But though we give scope to the individual, constraining the conscience of no man in the non-essentials of faith, yet we are no more a Church of license than our government is one of anarchy. For we are limited in the exercise of our liberty by the healthful restraint of the Bible. Be it said again, the Word of God is our standard of faith. This is evidenced by our name, the Evangelical, the Gospel Church. Others may call themselves Lutheran after a man; Reformed because of some incident in history; Episcopal or Presbyterian because of a form of government, or Baptist after one of the sacraments, we know nothing superior to the Bible. And by adopting the name “Evangelical” because the Gospel or good news of Jesus Christ is the very heart of the Bible, we recognize the sway and power of the Bible as the God given guide to salvation.

The Need of Doctrinal Standards

But why accept Luther's Catechism, the Augsburg Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism at all? Isn't the Bible sufficient? Yes, the Bible would be sufficient were all men unprejudiced and single-minded in their endeavors to find the truth and the whole truth therein stated. But so much that is false and erroneous has been taught about the Bible; - in the course of the centuries past the sacred Book has been interpreted to suit so many men's idle whims and perverted notions; - parts of it have so frequently been disconnected from the whole and made to fit into the pet scheme of some misled teacher, that it is necessary to have some general interpretation of its salient truths. And the above named books contain the interpretation which we accept. And though they are old, there is no necessity for their revision or displacement. They were written in the time of great light sent from God. They contain all that is necessary to refute the errors of that time and the times preceding. And since the mind of man runs in ruts, whatever has disquieted or alarmed the Church since that time can easily be recognized as an old fallacy in a new garb. “There is nothing new under the sun,” in the line of fallacious teachings alleged to be based on the Bible. The ingenuity of the evil one has long exhausted itself in this direction. And in these books we have the Bible doctrine as free from error, misunderstandings or imperfection as man can make it. Therefore we hold to them, placing them next to, but below the Bible in point of importance, in the matter of the regulation of our faith. And as proof of our allegiance to the Bible we claim the privilege of going back to the precious Word itself in those points in which these books do not perfectly agree.