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# Moving Toward Lutheran Unity

OLIVER R. HARMS

**T**wo words in this topic seem to me very important: "moving" and "unity." They express thoughts that many persons seemingly have wanted to avoid or to ignore. There are those who say we are already at the point of unity. Others are sure we will never get there. Some flexibility in thought is required at both ends of this spectrum of opinion.

The topic is realistic. It is not careless. It expresses exactly what is going on, and it points to the goal all Lutherans ought to seek. This topic is not as cruel as it would be if it insinuated that no differences exist among Lutherans; nor is it insensitive to the feelings of some who believe that the great historic Lutheran positions are being undermined by laxity and indifference.

As Lutherans who are moving toward unity, we take a firm stand on the Scriptures and the historic Lutheran Confessions. With the great confessions we should be willing to make a courageous witness stating what we believe; and then, too, be willing to say what we reject. Our problem through the years has been that we went too far in one or the other direction. Either we did not consider one another to be truly Lutheran or we sometimes acted as though Lutheranism was not very important.

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*Oliver R. Harms is president of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. This speech was delivered before the National Lutheran Editors and Managers Association in St. Louis, Sept. 20, 1967.*

In the past certain historic events have given impetus to Lutheran unity. The formation of the National Lutheran Council following World War I is one example. Lutherans do well to capitalize on the celebration of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation. We should do this for our own encouragement, and we should do so for the sake of many who need to hear the clear, ringing tones of justification as Luther spelled it out—God declaring the sinner righteous for Christ's sake through faith apart from works. This common understanding is a strong impetus to encourage us to manifest Lutheran unity in our day.

We can say with a united voice to a divided world what the central doctrine of the Reformation really means to us and to all mankind. We are able to say together that justification is God's act, not man's. It is the act of our gracious God who offered His Son, who though He was equal with the Father nevertheless emptied Himself and became obedient unto the death of the cross. Our faith is secure because we know that God did not overlook His holiness and righteousness in effecting our deliverance. In faith we affirm that complete satisfaction was made by the atoning work of Jesus Christ. His self-offering on Golgotha, when He was Himself the Priest and Himself the Victim, availed for all human beings of all times. By His death He destroyed death and by His rising to life again He has restored to us everlasting life. God "disarmed the



principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them" in Christ and His cross.

We must of necessity do what we can so that all Christians get a sense of the urgency of discerning the truth. Unless we truly understand justification, we cannot move as we should. It is not enough that people somehow come near having the truth we Lutherans have and have professed in our great proclamations.

We are encouraged by the climate among Christians today. We ought to make use of its benign characteristics and establish a sound Lutheran base in this country from which all Lutherans can and will give a united testimony of faith and life. Some Lutherans are moved at this time to testify to unity. Let me take a thought or two from the statement of agreement prepared by representatives of The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod. I think it is significant:

"The members of the committee are unanimous in asserting that where Lutheran bodies have been granted and have discovered a consensus in the preaching of the Gospel in conformity with a pure understanding of it and in the administration of the sacraments in accordance with the divine Word, they not only may but should enter into pulpit and altar fellowship."

Again, from the same statement:

"According to the Scriptures, the people of God are to confess their common Lord with one mind and one voice and to live together in unity and mutual assistance. Where people disagree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel, they cannot make common cause in their witness to

the Gospel. Conversely, where Christians share a wholehearted consensus in their understanding and proclamation of the Gospel, it is sinful separatism for them to erect or maintain barriers to fellowship."

Moving toward Lutheran unity should help us overcome many ruptures that have occurred in Lutheranism among those who were united. When I think of the record of history of yesteryear, I am reminded of our close relationship with former members of the Synodical Conference. I think of synods who in the fourth quarter of the previous century permitted doctrinal differences to arise and to become barriers to unity. The unity-destroying controversy over the doctrine of the eternal and gracious election removed any hopes our fathers had of creating one united Lutheran church body in this country. When I think of the pages of history written yesterday where the ink is still wet, I realize how difficult is the task of becoming unified and of staying united. Moving toward Lutheran unity causes us to see the broken fellowship all around and should cause us to set up safeguards against similar recurrences in future times.

Moving toward Lutheran unity isn't an easy task, nor is it a goal easily reached. Many developments from past church history provide examples. Schisms, separatism, legalism — these are scandals we ought to remove. But we have an adversary, the old evil foe, who seeks to hinder the course of Lutheran unity.

I have no desire to try for something new as a basis on which to move toward Lutheran unity. If Lutheran unity is to achieve realization, it must come on the basis of our historic position as Lutherans. Scripture and the historic Lutheran Con-



fessions are our doctrinal basis. On the foundation of these two we need to be assured that we agree. Such consensus will give us the necessary assurance that subscription to God's divinely inspired Word and to the other historical Lutheran Confessions means the same to all of us.

Just as Holy Scripture provided Luther with a sound basis for all he said and did, so our source for information for our faith and hope and for a life under God is the Bible and the Bible alone. It is the infallible, divinely inspired Word which God gave us through the holy men who spoke and wrote as the Holy Ghost moved them.

On the basis of the three cardinal principles of the Reformation we can speak out. This is the kind of witness the Lutheran Church can give. I would hope that within our lifetime we might experience the gathering into one great confessional body of all the Lutherans in this country so that we might make a greater impact upon society.

This might be one way of showing the world that the church has not failed. We ought to ask the question of those who say it has failed whether the church has failed in the case of people who through the church learned to know the message of Jesus and Him crucified, who came to faith in Jesus by the power of the Spirit working through the Word. Did the

church fail where people were converted to God? Did the church fail where people were changed? The church will not fail when it brings the message of justification, for God has promised that His Word will not return void. In our own surroundings, amid all the rioting in our own country, we have but one message that can remedy these situations. That message is Christ yesterday, today, and forever.

The need for sounding a voice and for bringing an impact on all areas of society should move us toward realized Lutheran unity with the strength and power God gives.

We need to bring our witness and our testimony to the people who are not with God so that they may be turned from their sinful ways to recognize the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not a quick way of doing things. This is the long way but the only way.

In these times, too, we ought not to be impressed with phrases simply because they refer to 16th- or 17th-century theology. We should rather be interested in the phrasing for today that builds on Holy Scripture as our one and only guide and speaks to the minds and the issues of today. And in moving, we do not move away from Holy Scripture, which is our source for action, for hope, for confidence. Holy Scripture: no more, no less.

St. Louis, Mo.