

# Church History

Vol. III

SEPTEMBER, 1934

No. 3

## LUTHERANISM AND THE REFORMED FAITH ON THE CONTINENT

ADOLF KELLER  
*Geneva, Switzerland*

It is a well known fact that the Lutheran Reformation has found entrance mostly into the nations of the Germanic race. The larger part of Germany and the northern countries around the Baltic Sea are Lutheran. Lutheranism has also gathered small groups in France, Holland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, but it is safe to say that there exists a certain affinity between the Lutheran faith and the Germanic race. The Reformed faith, in the form of Calvinism or of the Zwinglian Reformation, has a more international character. From its birthplaces in Zürich and Geneva it penetrated into France, Holland, Scotland, Hungary, Lithuania, and conquered even the House of Hohenzollern. The relationship between the two confessions, considered from a statistical point of view, has undergone but little change in the last few centuries. The most important alterations perhaps have taken place as a result of the union in the Church of Prussia and of the formation of the Czechoslovak Church of the Czech Brethren. The Reformed faith has been nearly extinguished in Russia where the larger parishes disappeared or were dissolved into Lutheran parishes. In Greece a young Presbyterian church is in the process of formation, and was considerably increased by the emigration of Greek refugees from Anatolia where the Southern Presbyterians had planted a hopeful missionary church.

The present situation of the two great Protestant communions on the Continent is influenced by the general crisis, the interdenominational movement towards unity, the reawakening

of the denominational consciousness, and the German revolution. We deal with these various aspects in the following chapters:

### 1. THE INFLUENCE OF THE CRISIS ON THE TWO CHURCH BODIES

The Lutheran churches have felt the crisis during and after the war in a more serious way, because they belong mostly, except the Scandinavian churches, to the belligerent nations. The Lutheran churches in Germany, in the Baltic states, in Poland, in Rumania and Yugoslavia have passed through great distress and hard privations. Most of their endowments have been wiped out by the war. Along the Baltic coast, especially in Latvia, hundreds of church buildings have been destroyed. The Lutheran church in Poland could not have settled its refugees coming back from Russia without the help from American Lutherans.

The Reformed churches in France have also undergone heavy losses, but their ruins have been rebuilt mostly with the help of American Protestants. In Hungary and Rumania Lutheran as well as Reformed people had to endure the same difficulties.

This distress had a stimulating effect upon their spiritual life. A great effort has been made to rebuild the destroyed churches and reconquer influence in the nations, and quite a number of new churches have been formed parallel to the new states, as for instance in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The present economic crisis means again a great danger for both of these church bodies. The problem of debts is becoming appalling for a number of them, especially in Belgium and Czechoslovakia. The distress has a specific influence on the recruiting of the clergy. The number of theological students was tremendously decreased during and after the war. In certain countries there is a painful lack of ministers, as for instance in Poland, on account of which older ministers are compelled to remain too long in service. This situation has also an influence on the education of the clergy. Several of these churches were obliged to admit ministers with inferior education, and in certain countries women were admitted to the ministry. The crisis has especially been detrimental to the Evangelical school both of the Lutheran and the Reformed type. This is particularly the case in Transylvania where a large

Calvinistic church of Hungarian race is struggling quite as much as the Lutheran Saxon church for the maintenance of the traditional confessional school.

## 2. THE INFLUENCE OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT ON THE CONFESSIONAL SITUATION

The Ecumenical Movement in modern times began with the preparations for the ecumenical conferences of Stockholm and Lausanne. The Stockholm Movement on Life and Work tried to prepare a common ground for practical cooperation between church bodies of different types. It included not only Lutherans and Reformed, but also the other non-Roman types of Christian churches. One of the obstacles which this movement found on its way was the confessional consciousness. When Archbishop Soederblom invited the Christian churches to attend the Universal Conference at Stockholm, the Lutheran Archbishop of Finland protested in a vehement way against such an attempt to overcome the existing obstacles to practical collaboration. The Finnish delegation therefore attended the Conference in an unofficial capacity. Many of the confessional Lutherans even in Germany were more than lukewarm towards the Ecumenical Movement, accusing it of neglecting confessional truth in the attempt to find a common basis for practical work. Generally speaking, the Reformed churches showed less intransigence in this respect than the confessional Lutherans.

Nevertheless, the basis for practical collaboration between Lutherans and Reformed became broader and broader, first on the mission field, where various types of missionary societies collaborated together in an international or a national council.

In the European Central Bureau for Inter-Church Aid, which was founded in 1922 in Copenhagen, the first attempt was made to complement denominational relief by a broad inter-denominational Protestant inter-church aid. It was an expression of the stronger ecumenical spirit in the Reformed faith that Reformed churches were more willing to support Lutheran churches and church projects than confessional Lutherans were to help their Reformed brethren. The International Protestant Loan Association, founded by the Central Bureau, granted loans to 85% from Lutheran bodies while the shares came to 98% from the Reformed side. Church bodies like those in Switzerland and in Scotland declared frequently that they were

not exclusively interested in denominational aid but in the common Protestant cause. During the Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne a joint meeting of Lutheran and Reformed delegates took place. It had become overwhelmingly clear that there existed a common Protestant front between Lutherans and Reformed, as against the Anglican and Orthodox interpretation of the place of the nation and the task of the church. It was realized on both sides that the Bible as sole source of our faith, justification by faith, the universal priesthood of believers, and liberty of conscience were a spiritual capital large enough in both communions to produce a kind of spiritual fellowship between Lutherans and Reformed. An attempt was made to formulate this community of faith in a joint statement, but after that date the ecumenical movement encountered a growing confessional consciousness which did not allow it to go very far.

The anniversary of the disputation of Marburg of 1929 was very significant in this respect. The faculty of Marburg had succeeded in bringing together a large conference composed of Lutheran and Reformed bodies, and Professor Otto made a proposal to establish a kind of a Protestant senate which would be capable of making statements from a common Protestant point of view. Professor Otto found at that time that the ecumenical movement should be built upon three pillars: the Protestant, the Anglican, and the Orthodox. He saw far-reaching possibilities of collaboration between Lutheran and Reformed bodies. The European Central Bureau, whose committee includes representatives of all Protestant church federations, was considered as the nucleus of such a Protestant joint body with the possibility of widening its scope and enlarging its tasks. These Marburg proposals corresponded in fact to the proposal which had been made at Oud-Wassenaar, Holland, immediately after the war by the Swiss churches, for the formation, not of an ecumenical movement of the present kind, but of a large joint Protestant body. Archbishop Soederblom, caring very much about the participation of Anglicans, was opposed to such a formation which, however, took place a few years later in the general Protestant Association of which Minister Slotemaker, Holland, is the president.

These attempts at reaching a stronger Protestant unity were more or less replaced by the ecumenical movements of Stockholm and Lausanne. They offered a common ground where Lutherans and Reformed could meet and realize to a

growing extent their essential unity in faith. The European section of the Universal Council on Life and Work is now such an official church council including Lutheran and Reformed churches with the view of joint practical tasks. In various countries the World Conference on Faith and Order stimulated the building up of joint study groups dealing with theological problems and preparing thus the ground for a theological approach of the two confessions. This is also the case with the ecumenical study conferences arranged by the International Christian Social Institute in Geneva. One of the recent study conferences made an inquiry into the theological background of the social activity of the churches. It became clear, for instance, that the Lutherans have a different approach to social work than the Reformed. The Lutherans find much stimulus in the Lutheran idea of vocation while the Reformed are starting from the question of the will of God to be done in the city of God. This led to a lively controversy on the conception of the social activity of the church as understood by Lutherans or Reformed, and this controversy is one of the main aspects in that stimulating conversation which has been in progress for ten years between American and European Protestantism.

The pessimistic and eschatological conception of the task of the church in the midst of the world is largely due to the Lutheran conception of the world and of the place of the Christians in this world. The world is more or less the devil's place. It is not the plastic element which could be moulded by Christian idealism. The Christian has to take the deep-reaching demonic opposition of the world against God very seriously and should take care not to fall into that social and optimistic idealism which seems to Lutherans so characteristic of American Puritanism. The criticism of American "activism" came mostly from Lutheran observers who felt a certain pride in the attempt of Calvinists to conquer and transform the world for God's sake. Luther's conception of the world as being under the wrath of God is always alive in Lutheran circles and does not allow them to enter with the same enthusiasm into the sphere of an idealistic social activity as the Reformed, especially Americans, are daring to do.

There is no doubt that the present ecumenical movement is counterbalanced by the growing denominational consciousness. This will lead us to the theological aspects of the problem with which we shall deal later. Suffice it to say here that a large

part of Lutheran bodies are more interested in what they call ecumenical Lutheranism than in ecumenical Protestantism. The strengthening of the Lutheran denominational consciousness is partly due to influence from America, where Lutherans were opposed to most of the interdenominational movements and for instance did not enter into the Federal Council. The American Lutherans of a more exclusive type, seconded by representatives of the same consciousness, refused therefore to participate in the celebration at Marburg and preferred to have their own special celebration. Such lack of cooperation hampered also a larger development of the European Central Bureau for Inter-Church Aid.

On the other hand it must be said that a stronger denominational consciousness developed also in certain Reformed bodies, especially in Holland, where Abraham Kuyper had formed an exclusive orthodox Reformed Church, and is vehemently opposed to any latitudinarianism in the church, refusing therefore collaboration with more broad-minded Reformed bodies. This Reformed consciousness was connected with national consciousness particularly in the Hungarian Reformed Church, where the Calvinist Hungarians are considered as being more exclusively interested in the national destiny than the Lutherans, who originally were more of German or Slovak extraction.

In spite of such differences and of theological controversies, the destiny of the evangelical faith on the Continent stimulates also the developing of a common Protestant consciousness which finds its expression in the above-mentioned interdenominational organizations and in a certain amount of mutual help and responsibility for each other.

### 3. CONTROVERSIAL THEOLOGY BETWEEN LUTHERANISM AND THE REFORMED CHURCHES

The growing denominational consciousness in Lutheranism as well as in Calvinism found a theological expression in what may be called neo-Lutheranism and neo-Calvinism.<sup>1</sup> Both may be characterised as a rebirth of the spirit of the Reformation. Continental Protestantism in the Lutheran as well as in the Reformed churches had undergone to a large extent the levelling influences of modernism and relativism. The distinctive fea-

<sup>1</sup> See the corresponding chapters in my *Stone Lectures* published under the title *Revolution and Religion*, by Fleming H. Revell, New York, 1934.

tures of the historic faith were largely forgotten or neglected in a number of churches which had even partly abolished their historical declarations of faith as compulsory, as for instance in Switzerland, and had replaced the old historic denomination-alism by a broad-minded and shallow latitudinarianism. The reaction against this modernism is due not simply to a group of single theologians or schools, but to a general desire to find a new orientation in the present chaos of life and to discover it in the fundamental doctrines of the Reformation.

Neo-Calvinism found its strongest expression in what is called the Barthian Movement or the Dialectical Theology. Although this group included not only Reformed but also Lutheran theologians such as Gogarten and Merz, its characteristic features are of a more Calvinistic type. The Calvinistic elements in this theology can be found in the emphasis laid upon the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. The whole theology is focused in this chief Calvinistic doctrine, which is emphasized so strongly that an immanentist theology is rebuked as unevangelical and unbiblical. The sovereignty of God and its characteristic expression in the doctrine of predestination are not only the central position in Reformed theology and preaching, but also the condition for all kinds of social activity. Another Reformed element in Barthianism is the exclusive fashion in which Barth himself is opposing a synthesis between revelation and other principles of theological explication, such as reason, Christian consciousness and cultural ethos. It is a theology without "ifs" and "ands." The Reformed character of this theology can also be seen in the stress which is laid upon the local congregation as the fundamental cell in the social structure of the church. This means a democratic character in the constitution of the church which is opposed to an episcopal constitution. Barth and his Reformed friends, Brunner and Thurneysen, stand not alone in this struggle, but are supported by independent Calvinists like LeCerf in Paris, de Saussure in Geneva, and Dutch and Hungarian theologians who emphasize in the same way these original Calvinistic elements of the modern neo-Calvinism.

The reawakening Lutheran consciousness has been stimulated not only by large confessional gatherings but also by some theologians such as Althaus, Elert and Sasse in Germany, Aulen and Runestam in Sweden. Their central doctrine is justification by faith. Lutheran theology feels therefore less

driven to plunge into social work and has a more optimistic and joyful conception of grace than the predestinarian interpretation of salvation in the Reformed doctrine.

This growing Lutheran consciousness is falling back of course upon the Augsburg Confession, and especially on the former edition of the *Confessio invariata* which does not yet show the mitigating influence of Melancthon and is distinctly exclusive in respect of the Reformed faith. Modern Lutheran theologians like Elert, Stapel and Schomerus show a rather intransigent attitude towards the Reformed conception and are far from forgetting the day of Marburg, 1529. Its "No!" which was responsible for the greatest split between the churches of the Reformation, stands as it was spoken; the Reformed doctrine is openly silenced as in the dogmatics of Aulen or openly attacked as wrong and harmful. A new interconfessional polemics or "eristics," as Emil Brunner calls it, is developing and the same *furor theologicus* which made Melancthon wish for death.

The divisive influence of a confessional theology has become obvious recently in a split in the Barthian groups which in the last analysis is due to a difference between a modern Lutheran and an old Calvinistic conception of faith. In Germany the modern Lutheran theology was developing into a nationalistic theology strongly influenced by Lutheran tendencies. It could be characterised as a Theology of Creation, taking such elements of creation as the blood, the race, the state, as God-given elements on which the nation, the church, and theology have to build. It was most characteristic that a statement of the Lutheran faculty of Erlangen and other statements coming from Lutheran theologians like Hirsch, Wobbermin, and theologians in Leipzig came very near to such a Theology of Creation, which was criticized by Karl Barth from his Reformed point of view as a mere natural theology having lost any distinctive features of the original Protestant faith. Karl Barth opposed to it a rigid theology of revelation and of the Word of God, falling back on the original distinctive elements in Calvin's theology. In spite of this tension between Lutheran and Reformed theology, Karl Barth's Reformed position had such a visible influence on certain groups within the Lutheran church that one spoke of the danger of a Calvinisation of the Lutheran Church.



#### 4. LUTHERANS AND CALVINISTS IN THE GERMAN REVOLUTION

The present German situation is illuminating. When the German revolution broke out, the totalitarian state aimed not only at a complete unification of the whole nation but also at a complete church union. German Protestantism consisted hitherto of twenty-eight national churches in the various provinces, beside which a number of Free Churches lived in relative liberty and independence. From the confessional point of view the Lutheran churches were in the majority. The Reformed churches were loosely held together in two Reformed associations; nevertheless the Reformed influence was very strong, especially in the Rhineland. The largest church, that of Prussia, was a united church, although the church union effected by Frederick William III was not so much a confessional as an administrative one. Lutherans and Reformed lived peacefully together under the roof of the same church government. This church union had as a result, however, the disappearance of many formerly Reformed parishes which were entirely amalgamated with the Lutheran parishes, so that it meant a great loss to the Reformed church. The genuine Lutheran churches in Germany were nevertheless profoundly dissatisfied with this church union and remained faithful to the *Augustana invariata*, repudiating any attempt at union with the Reformed bodies. To celebrate jointly the Holy Communion is repugnant to the original Lutheran consciousness. It happens that in the German Evangelical Church of the Augsburg and the Helvetic confessions in Galicia, Poland, when the Holy Communion is celebrated in the same parish jointly, the elements are offered to the respective members of the parish according to their special rite. The Lutheran pastor, for instance, distributes the Holy Communion in the same service to both the Reformed and the Lutheran members of his parish, and the elements, the Lutheran wafer and the Reformed bread, are lying peacefully together on the same plate as if there never had been a Marburg Colloquy. The Lutheran receives the wafer kneeling before the pastor who puts the wafer on his tongue, while the Reformed stands upright and takes the bread himself from the plate. The same mode of partaking of the Holy Communion was practiced in the German Church of Hesse, where since ancient times similar union tendencies have remained alive.

Not only dogmatics but also church politics had hampered

the relationship between Lutherans and Reformed in Germany, especially when owing to the Reformed opposition from the Rhineland, the Evangelical Church of Prussia was prevented from introducing an episcopal government into the church.

When the German revolution broke out, the church ideal of the leading national socialists was one united evangelical and national church. This ideal was based on the fact that the church people had a different consciousness of confessional differences than the theologians. A man in the street does not feel himself as a Lutheran or a Reformed, but simply as an evangelical or as a Protestant. The unification of the church should have been a contribution to the unification of the totalitarian state. A certain group went even so far as to dream of one national Christian church combining the Catholic and the evangelical bodies. Nobody outside this group who knew the historic differences took the proposition seriously.

What would have been possible was a church union growing out of the existing church federation with a recognition of the historic confessions of faith. The church union in Prussia as well as the church in Württemberg could have been considered as a preliminary realization of this church ideal.

But the awakening denominational consciousness prohibited the realization of this possibility. General Superintendent Zoellner and other Lutherans aroused Lutheran opposition against any church union. The old Lutheran party with its center in Breslau which had refused to accept church union even for Prussia, together with this new Lutheran formation, considered the United Prussian Church a lamentable example of church union and made it a special target for their attacks. Nevertheless, a joint preliminary ministry worked out a plan for an establishment of one evangelical church in Germany under Lutheran leadership but including Lutherans and Reformed; but even such a plan was denounced as the ruin of Lutheranism by men like Professor Sasse in Erlangen. The Lutheran opposition to any church union made it necessary also for the Reformed bodies in Germany to come closer together. The result was a strengthening of the confessional consciousness in a struggle where all the evangelical forces should have formed one united Christian front against the attempt of the state to bring the church again under its full control.

We cannot describe here all phases of the political struggle within the German church and have to confine ourselves to the

development of the confessional aspect. We have shown that a certain affinity existed between the national socialistic theology represented by men like Hirsch, Gogarten, Beyer, Stapel, and the Lutheran theology of the "*Schöpfungsordnungen*," "the orders of creation," where the blood, the race, the state, are interpreted as God-given elements of the world order. A similar affinity prevailed in the relationship of the Lutherans with the episcopal church government. A group of Lutheran churches already possessed bishops, as for instance in Saxony. With the leadership idea dominating the German mind it became quite natural to put the German church under a Lutheran bishop and to invest him with unusual power. He has, according to the new church law, not only executive but even legislative powers; but here the Reformed opposition was inexorable. "No bishop!" has always been the slogan of the Reformed bodies. In spite of the fact that the Reformed Church in Hungary lives under an episcopal system which had not hitherto menaced church liberty in the least, the German bishop became once more as in Scotland the target of all Reformed attacks. When Bishop Müller became elected as *Reichsbischof* for the whole Evangelical German Church, the Reformed made it clear through their spokesman, the Rev. Mr. Hesse, that they would not accept him in his episcopal function, but only as the representative of the whole church in administrative matters. The question of the bishop became nearly a kind of shibboleth between the Lutherans and the Reformed.

It was once more evident that Lutheranism was not only more conservative in regard to social problems and more open to a natural theology based on "the orders of creation," but also was much more menaced with the danger of sacrificing its independence to the totalitarian claims of the state. The close relationship between church and state was hailed enthusiastically by Lutherans as a form of social responsibility with less restriction and reservations than in the Reformed church, which stood not only for theological continuity but also for an unrestricted liberty of the church in all spiritual affairs and for a thorough discrimination between the state and its temporal power in the one side and the church and its spiritual rights on the other. With the fact that Karl Barth became a widely acknowledged leader of the opposition not only within the Reformed circles but for the whole church standing for the continuity of the Reformation, the Reformed opposition

became so to speak the strongest bulwark of the opposition against state control and the ultimate and absolute theological defender of the inner liberty of the evangelical church. The Reformed theology having stood historically for independence and democratic organization of the church was thus enabled to render a real service to the whole evangelical church struggling for the soundness and the liberty of the church, menaced with the authority of the state and a nationalistic state theology.

Hence the Reformed church in Germany holds a strategic position in the present struggle for the liberty of the church and purity of doctrine. On three fronts the general evangelical opposition is guided by Reformed principles: 1. In the defense of the principle of the sovereignty of God, which excludes any coordinated principle as a basis for the confession of faith, such as the official theology offers in creative nature or in history considered as a creative power. Karl Barth, a Reformed theologian, has thus become a *defensor fidei* for the evangelical Lutherans as well as for the Reformed, while the leading Lutheran theologians like Hirsch, Gogarten, Althaus, Mandel, Stapel, Schomerus and others could not entirely resist the temptation to adapt the Gospel to the claims of the natural theology of the time and tried to find a synthesis between the message of the Gospel and the claims of nature or history.

2. The genuine Reformed opposition against the bishop has been profoundly justified in view of the abuse of power practiced by the nationalistic bishops who used illegal force to impose their doctrine on the pastors and the parishes. The inconsiderate introduction of the bishop into the church by episcopalians against the warning of the Reformed church has proved to be an application of the political leadership-idea to the church and led rapidly to an open revolt and to a discrediting of the episcopal Constitution. The Reformed synodical system has therefore gained new ground even in the united and Lutheran circles, especially among the Rhineland fraternities of pastors.

3. With the entering of the parishes into the struggle for the liberty of the church, the Reformed conception of the congregation as constituting the fundamental unit of the church is emphasized as it never was by the Lutherans. The Reformed idea of the parish shapes a new type of church consciousness and awakens a parochial democratic spirit, in the opposition to an imposed authority. The destiny of the evan-

gelical church in Germany depends partly, from the theological point of view, on the victory of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, and from the constitutional point of view, on the resistance of the parishes against an irresponsible church government. Both these positions are genuinely Reformed.

A new phase of the development begins with the national Synod which was held at Barmen, May 29-31, 1934. It became clear at this Synod that the former denominational differences between the Lutherans and the Reformed were of minor importance compared with the large amount of consensus which had approved during the common struggle for the liberty of the church and the purity of doctrine. It is a remarkable fact that the *Junge Kirche* declared in its issue No. 10 (1934), that the confessional differences between the two bodies would no more provoke a schism in the German church. This does not mean a united church as advocated by the German Christians, who see the basis of their unity not in a confession of faith but in the nation and the race.

The Synod of Barmen, where Lutherans and Reformed issued a common statement, prepared a basis broad enough to allow both groups to take their stand on the declaration that the Bible is the sole source of authority, that Christ is the sole Lord of the church, that the church repudiates the totalitarian claim of the state, and that political and religious aims should not be confounded. The historic discrimination between the Lutherans and the Reformed is not touched upon in this article, but a way is opened toward a deeper common heritage, the authority of the Bible, the sovereignty of God, the exclusive salvation by grace, and the universal priesthood of believers; the historic discriminating articles are provisionally not mentioned, so that joint communion is not excluded in principle.

This is a remarkable step towards a consensus of the Lutheran and the Reformed groups. Such a consensus is going to be reached in the doctrine *de Ecclesia* which the present need made a common front possible. Even where separation prevails, the hope is expressed jointly that the Holy Ghost may lead the divided groups towards the unity of the Spirit and towards an interpretation of the Gospel and the sacraments based on a common understanding of the Bible. This common understanding of the nature of a true evangelical church has helped to prepare the common front both of the denominational-minded

Lutherans and Reformed against all tendencies to dissolve the confessional differences in an administratively united church.

The Pastors' Emergency Association refused to be identified with one or the other group and stated that by forming a common front neither the Lutherans nor the Reformed gave up their confessional status; they are thankful to Karl Barth for having stimulated afresh within the united church the denominational consciousness which does not exclude in essentials unity of faith and action. It is acknowledged even by Lutherans (*Junge Kirche*, p. 440) that Barth awoke again that serious reflection on the true nature of the church that made possible again a reconsideration of the Lutheran Confession of Faith.

The Synod of Barmen will remain epoch-making because never in history has the confessional consciousness found such a combination with the will for unity as here. Two "convents" were organized, both of which tried to give a better expression of what Lutheranism and the Reformed faith meant and yet did not enter into polemics with each other. The *Junge Kirche* observed however that neither the Lutheran nor the Reformed body could find a uniform definition of their confessional basis. The unity of a common spiritual front does not mean a homogeneous denominational organization or a confessional identity. Union will not come from fresh formulas of unity but from listening to the Spirit which breathes through the Scriptures, for neither the Lutheran nor the Reformed creeds are considered a final and absolute interpretation of Christianity.