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# A Partially Achieved Dream: Theological Issues in Recent Canadian Lutheran History

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I had been invited by the Division of Theology of the Lutheran Council In Canada to present this article at its last meeting, November 1985. I was invited because I had had by far the longest tenure as a member of this Division, having been with it from its beginning nineteen years ago. Furthermore, I had been a member of the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships and more recently of the Merger Commission of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada and the Lutheran Church in America-Canada Section. The suggested topic was "Theological Issues in Canadian Church History". Because of my experience in these discussions, I decided to deal with the theological issues I found raised during my time with these groups.

Norman Threinen, in his book *Fifty Years of Lutheran Convergence: The Canadian Case Study*,<sup>1</sup> has done an excellent job of describing the theological issues in Canadian Lutheranism up to the end of the sixties. I shall not attempt to repeat this. I want also to emphasize that I do not see my paper as an historical record. I am presenting my own reminiscences and interpretations. This paper is subjective. Hopefully it may be useful to a historian, such as Norman Threinen, when the history of this period is written. But the historian will need to weigh it along with a great deal of other materials.

The "dream" in my topic is the dream of founding one Lutheran church in Canada. The partial achievement obviously is the founding of the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada.

When I arrived at the Seminary in Saskatoon in 1966, I found that the air was filled with great hopes for the imminent

merger of the three major Lutheran bodies in Canada. As president of the Seminary, my first public lecture was given at a banquet held during the founding of the Lutheran Council In Canada. As Norman Threinen points out in his book, the discussions leading up to this had begun some twenty years earlier. The fact that it was now coming into being was a most hopeful sign. Furthermore, an important part of this Canadian council was its Theological Division which had been given the task of seeking consensus among Canadian Lutherans.

Within the next five years Lutheran unity took major strides. Fellowship was declared between the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada (ELCC) and between the ELCC and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). These declarations of fellowship did leave a notable gap as there was not fellowship between the LCMS and the LCA, but it did seem that could soon be overcome inasmuch as the two churches were both in fellowship with the ELCC. The ELCC in convention invited the other two Lutheran bodies to enter into merger negotiations and both accepted. By 1970, the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships (JCILR) was able to issue its *Affirmation and Appeal*<sup>2</sup> in which it is affirmed that the basis for fellowship and merger did exist. The three churches were called upon to hold meetings in various locations to discover and express the unity that exists among Lutherans. Cooperation among the three groups in theological education at Saskatoon was well under way. The campus ministries were amalgamated. It seemed in the early days of the 1970s that we were on the verge of bringing into being one Lutheran church in Canada. When Otto Olson presented a paper to the JCILR, in which he attempted to demonstrate the official steps necessary to bring about one Lutheran church, he concluded that it would take at least ten years. The only major argument with his paper was that this was going to be far too long. Merger should come much sooner.

Personally, I was very optimistic about a three-way merger. I still recall an early meeting of the Division of Theology at which Frederick Schole, President of the Alberta-British Columbia District, LCMS, asked me how the consensus question looked to me as one who had come to Lutheranism from the outside. My response was that, to a newcomer, the most remarkable thing was the obvious similarity of the three

Lutheran groups. My response was made on the basis of a great many ecumenical contacts. Ordained in the United Church of Canada, attending the Union Theological Seminary (an inter-denominational school), teaching in the Quaker college at Swarthmore and at the Methodist Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. I had been involved in a great many inter-denominational discussions. The striking thing about our Lutheran discussions, in contrast to my earlier experience, was precisely how much we had in common.

To illustrate: when, at Garrett, I announced that I was being taken onto the clergy roster of the American Lutheran Church (ALC), one of my Methodist colleagues said to me, "Bill, how can you give up your freedom by joining an authoritarian church like that?" My quick response was, "I would not want to belong to a church in which I could not be a heretic." My answer was not just a wise crack. One of the things that impressed me about the Methodist church was that it was almost impossible to be a heretic. As a church, it did not put much emphasis upon theology, and its clergy were given almost complete leeway so long as they did not smoke or drink. For example, Northwestern University had, in its philosophy department, a man who was an avowed atheist, yet he retained his ordination in the Methodist church. To come from such an environment and move into the inter-Lutheran discussions was a remarkable change. All Lutherans agreed that their position had to be tested by Biblical revelation. All agreed on accepting the Lutheran Confessions which guided them to read Scripture in light of justification by grace through faith and the Law-Gospel dichotomy. We all accepted the same presuppositions and were all much concerned with the purity of doctrine. In so many of the ecumenical discussions that I had been in there were no common presuppositions. It was almost impossible sometimes to argue because you did not share enough common ground to make disagreement meaningful. As a result of my experience and observation of the Canadian scene I was quite optimistic that Lutheran unity was well within sight.

Given all the hopeful events in the late 1960s and early 1970s, what went wrong? Why is it that, instead of a three-way merger, we had to settle for a two-way merger? There were no doubt some personality problems, but these were in no way responsible for the break-down of negotiations. On the

contrary, close friendships and good personal relations were formed in both the Division of Theology and the JCILR. Neither was it because of a failure in tactics. There were some tactical blunders. One of the obvious mistakes was the setting of a deadline for the merger. This was seen by some members of the JCILR as putting undue pressure upon them and not giving the necessary time to work through the problems. But such mistakes were not responsible for the failure of the process. Basically there was but one reason for the failure, and it was a good Lutheran reason. It was impossible to agree theologically.

When one recalls the past history of inter-Lutheran discussions, it must be said that the Canadian discussions arrived at a great deal of agreement. In other times and places Lutherans have battled over the "*Quia/Quatenus*" issue. That is, do we accept the Confessions *because* they agree with the Scriptures or *insofar as* they agree with the Scriptures? No one in the JCILR made any case for the "in so far as" argument. It was generally agreed that to subscribe to a Confession only insofar as it agrees with Scripture means that we really don't need a Confession at all. We would be better off simply to use the Bible. There were some mild debates as to the status of historical and other statements in the Confessions, but basically it was agreed that subscription is to the doctrinal teaching of the Confessions. This was a major breakthrough.

Agreement was achieved on the doctrine of the church and the nature of the gospel. Likewise no problems were found with regard to the sacraments. There was a little quibbling over the Lodge issue, particularly because all three groups seemed to fail to practice what they preached on this issue, but the statement on the subject was passed with no great problems. Unionism created a bit of a stir. Early in the life of the Division of Theology we instituted a dialogue with the Roman Catholics. This brought a protest from the ELCC which saw a problem of Unionism. Louis Scholl, as the Executive Director, wrote a very useful paper on the nature of "dialogue" which stilled the brief flurry. A statement on unionism won agreement.

It is usually said that the issue which sank the ship of Lutheran unity was the ordination of women. There is much evidence that this was the case. After dealing with the subject

at several meetings, the JCILR failed to come to an agreement. An attempted compromise in which no congregation would have to accept women pastors failed to win support. Finally, confessing its failure to deal with the issue, the JCILR decided to bring its endeavors to an end in the late 1970s. Missouri went its own way while the LCA and the ELCC set up the Merger Commission. This finally resulted in the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada.

The importance of the ordination issue is illustrated by the fact that the JCILR requested the Division of Theology to study the question and report back on whether we found it to be a church-divisive issue. This was noteworthy inasmuch as our Division had felt isolated in the merger discussions. Our mandate was to seek consensus among Lutherans. However, the JCILR had set up a theology committee which studied all the issues to be discussed and reported back to the Commission. It had left the Division feeling that its primary task had been taken over by the new committee. When the Division was asked for a report on women's ordination it was a good sign that the Commission was desperately searching for new light on the subject. The Division turned in a report in which it gave theological reasons for not seeing women's ordination as a church-divisive issue. However, one member of the Division refused to concur and wrote his own minority report. Again, we had underlined the failure to get agreement on this issue.

Further evidence for the crucial nature of the ordination question appeared when the LCMS in 1979 sent a committee to Saskatoon to study the Seminary to see if the Church was justified in having its seminarians trained there. In its report, the committee chose to make its first negative comment on the Saskatoon Seminary in the area of women's ordination. Granting that no effort was being made to force a point of view onto Missouri Synod students, it nonetheless pointed out that all the faculty believed in women's ordination. Furthermore, the presence of women studying to be ordained ministers is, "intentionally or not, a rather effective sensitivity training for LC-MS students to be conditioned to vote in favor of the ordination of women in the future". Inasmuch as Missouri did withdraw from the Saskatoon Seminary, it surely is significant that the negative impression chosen to lead all the rest was the question of women's ordination.

Despite the weighty evidence indicating that women's ordination was the decisive question that led to the Missouri Synod's withdrawal from the negotiations, there is good reason to argue that it was more a symptom than the major illness. Behind and underlying the ordination issue was the whole question of Scripture itself. For many of the LCMS delegation, the stand of the LCA and the ELCC on women's ordination was simply the final proof that we did not really accept the authority of Scripture.

In November 1973, the JCILR produced a statement on the Holy Scriptures. In January of 1974 the JCILR and the Division of Theology published jointly an *Issues* brochure, *Theses on the Holy Scriptures*,<sup>3</sup> which included the statements accepted plus commentary by Norman Threinen. In the Foreword, recalling how, in the past, views of the Scripture had divided Lutherans, the brochure read: "It is therefore with great joy that the Joint Commission on Inter-Lutheran Relationships reports to the churches that it has unanimously adopted a statement on the Scriptures which it deems acceptable and adequate for Canadian Lutheranism." And there was great joy in Lutheran circles, for it did seem that the major stumbling block to Lutheran unity had been overcome.

This joy did not live beyond the next meeting of the JCILR. The commissioners from the Ontario District of the LCMS angrily denounced the *Theses* because they had not voted to "adopt" the statements but rather they had voted to accept the statements as a study document to be distributed to the churches. An acrimonious debate followed over what, in reality, had occurred at the November meeting. As it happens, the November 1973 meeting was just about the only meeting of the JCILR which I missed. Therefore, I am in no position to pass judgment upon who was correct in their interpretation of the events at that fateful meeting. One thing is certain, the majority of the commissioners did believe that the commission had adopted the statements as acceptable and adequate for Canadian Lutheranism. However, the Ontario District representatives obviously did not recall it that way.

The dissenters did not disagree with any of the theses *per se*, but they did not agree that they were "adequate". The Foreword to the *Issues* publication emphasized that the statement "attempts to approach its subject from a positive point of

view, to express concepts in a fresh way and, where possible, to use terminology which the Scriptures themselves use. For this reason some terminology familiar to some of the readers may not have been used." This comment was a thinly veiled explanation as to why the document did not use the term "inerrant". The Ontario District representatives felt that the statements were inadequate in that they did not affirm the inerrancy of the Scriptures, and the statements left open the possibility of the historical critical approach to Scripture. They tried to add some statements to the seven which had been published, but the majority of the JCILR resisted the attempt. In order to get along with the business, the status of the *Theses* was put on the back burner. But the issue was not forgotten, and an underlying suspicion lingers that there was no consensus on the matter of the Scriptures. When, therefore, no agreement came on the question of women's ordination, it seemed to illustrate that two different views of Scripture were present.

It is not easy to define the difference in Scriptural views that emerged. During the 1920s and 1930s of this century most main-line Christian denominations in North America were torn apart by the fundamentalist-liberal controversy which raged around the understanding of the Bible. Lutherans sat out that battle. Therefore, one might wise crack that Lutherans were behind the times and did not take up the fundamentalist-liberal controversy until the 1970s. But that interpretation does not hold water. The *Theses on the Holy Scriptures* were in no way a liberal document. They affirmed the inspiration of the Scriptures, declaring them to be "completely and entirely" the Word of God revealing God's Law and Gospel. And they declared the Scriptures to be a "fully reliable witness to God's gracious will".

Those who did not find the *Theses* adequate were concerned to keep the concept of "inerrancy". Believing that the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit guiding the human writer, without overriding the personality of the writer, this group believed that it necessarily follows that the Scriptures are without error. Furthermore, the group asserted, the history of churches in recent centuries illustrates vividly that once it is admitted that Scriptures may err in any matter, it is not long until all of the teachings of Scripture become suspect. Historical criticism comes to put the Scriptures through a third degree in which

human reason sets itself above Scripture. If the Scriptures are to maintain the normative place which Lutherans have always confessed, it is necessary to affirm that they are inerrant in all their parts. This, of course, does not say that any particular manuscript that we have or any particular translation is inerrant. But it does affirm that the original manuscripts were without error, and the Holy Spirit has so guided the keeping of the Scriptures that they now contain no errors that would hinder the full and complete understanding of the Law and Gospel message from God.

The majority of JCILR members were unhappy with the term "inerrant". They argued that the term is neither Biblical nor is it found in the Lutheran Confessions. It is misleading because it both affirms too little and too much. It is too little because something (e.g. a student's mathematical examination) may be inerrant without it being particularly significant or important. It is too much because it results in claiming ultimate authority for the scriptures on all matters they may mention including matters of science. The Scriptures, this group affirmed, are our ultimate authority in matters of doctrine and Christian life. Scripture is God's revelation of that which human beings could not learn for themselves—God's saving will for humanity. They are not a revelation of things that humans can discover for themselves—science, etc.

The majority group also argued that the Lutheran Confessions had refrained quite rightly from presenting a doctrine of how the Scriptures were inspired. *The Theses on the Holy Scriptures* affirmed that "The Holy Scriptures are a mystery of God's grace, completely and entirely the Word of God while they are simultaneously in every way the words of men". This affirms the mystery of God's Word in, under and with the words of human beings without attempting to spell out a doctrine of how the Scriptures are inspired. As such, this seemed to the majority in JCILR to be analogous to the Lutheran position on the Lord's Supper. While Roman Catholics with their doctrine of transubstantiation, and the Reformed tradition with its emphasis upon the Supper as a memorial meal, tried to explain how Christ was present in the Supper, Lutherans were content to affirm the mystery of Christ's real presence in the elements of bread and wine without trying to explain it further.

When the JCILR admitted that it had failed to find consensus and thus a basis for a three-way merger, the task of seeking consensus was returned to the Division of Theology. Recognizing that the JCILR had foundered on the attempt to get a statement *about* the Bible, the Division planned a series of meetings in which it tried to decide whether there was a significant difference in the way in which Lutherans actually used and interpreted the Bible. We had several meetings in which representatives of the different Lutheran churches exegeted certain passages of Scripture, and we tried to see whether important differences could be found between the churches. And then, recalling that the Augsburg Confession (article VII) affirms that "it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word" we invited representatives of the Churches to preach sermons on certain selected passages to see if in preaching there was a discernible difference in the use of Scripture.

The findings of the Division in this matter were that among Lutherans there are differences in exegeting and preaching Scriptural passages. But we did not find any simple correlation of these differences with membership in specific church bodies. If we think of a spectrum described as running from conservatism to liberalism, we found that there were some strange results. LCA representatives sometimes appeared quite far up the conservative end of the spectrum while LCMS representatives were much further along the liberal part of the spectrum. ELCC representatives came in at both ends of the spectrum. This was not really surprising because, in the JCILR itself, the Missouri representatives did not agree on the opposition to the *Theses on the Holy Scriptures*. The majority who rejected the additions proposed by the Ontario District representatives included LCMS commissioners as well as ELCC and LCA commissioners. On the other hand, discussions of the materials at church conventions proved that there were groups in both the ELCC and the LCA that agreed with the Ontario District's position.

The debate on women's ordination illustrates some of the different ways of interpreting Scripture. It should be seen clearly that both sides in this debate were primarily concerned

to justify their stand on Biblical grounds. No one argued for women's ordination on the basis of sociology or as a means of getting into step with the modern world. Those who affirmed ordination of women were convinced that either Scripture did not oppose such ordination or that Scripture actually required the ordination of women. Those who opposed women's ordination sometimes used the argument that for two thousand years the church had not ordained women, but they did not rest their case on this but rather used it to demonstrate that their interpretation of the Scriptures was the same as that of the church through the centuries. Both sides were rooted in Scripture, but they came to different conclusions on the subject. Were these differences due to a basically different approach to Scripture or due to the sinful-finiteness of the interpreters?

The opposition to women's ordination rested heavily upon certain New Testament passages, for example, Paul's admonition to women to keep silent in the churches (I Corinthians 14:34), the I Timothy passage admonishing women to learn submissively in silence and which goes on to say, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent" (I Timothy 2:11-12) and passages admonishing wives to be obedient to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22, I Peter 3:1).

Those advocating women's ordination responded that all such statements are found in letters written to specific occasions and are not intended as universal rules for all times and places. In the New Testament itself we find women referred to as prophets and apostles; this is not compatible with their always remaining silent in church or with not teaching men. Obviously time does not allow me to develop this argument, for it has to be done passage by passage, trying to find the original intent of the statement and then showing that it applied to the situation of that time and place rather than to all times and places.

The opposition to women's ordination also leaned heavily on the concept of the orders of creation. Man was created first and was designated as the head of woman. Just as the state is an order of creation which requires obedience to rulers, so the relationship of man and woman is a created order. This does not say that the rulers or men are more worthy, closer to God, or superior in God's sight. It simply affirms that in the God-ordained social order of things, woman has her

role to fulfill and man has his. Man is to be the head of the household, the one who exercises authority and headship. Thus it is unfitting for a woman to take the role of pastor or preacher. And so when the proponents of women's ordination quoted one of their favorite texts, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28), the opponents of women's ordination argued that here Paul is simply affirming the equality of men and women in grace and that it is an abuse of Scripture to try to use this to explain away what Paul says about the social relationship of man and woman based on the orders of creation.

Defenders of women's ordination responded that, in creation, there is an equality of man and woman. Both together are the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Despite Eve's being created second, there is no evidence that she was inferior to Adam in any way. She is to be, in the Hebrew, Adam's *EZER* (Genesis 2:18). This word, mistranslated as "helpmeet" (AV) or "helper" (RSN) does not imply any subservience. On the contrary, half of the times it is used in the Bible it refers to God, half refers to a social equal and never to a social inferior. It is only after the fall that God says that the husband shall rule over the wife. The argument for man's headship over woman is thus based not on creation but on the fall. But as Christians who are new people in Christ, no longer in Adam, we are called to live according to the equality (including social equality) that was the mark of the original creation.

The case for women's ordination was based heavily upon Jesus' relations with women. Obviously Jesus treated women as equals with men. According to John's Gospel, Jesus revealed his messiahship first of all to a woman (a Samaritan who was living common-law with a man) and sent her to her village to tell others. He taught Mary in a day when the Torah was not taught to women. Women were among his followers, the first resurrection appearances were to women, and they were told to go tell of it to the men. Again and again Jesus broke through the patriarchal traditions of his time and place to recognize the equality of women. Furthermore, it is obvious that this continued in the early church inasmuch as Paul tells us frequently of the women who served with him in the work of the church.

The opponents of women's ordination responded that while all of this is true, nonetheless, Jesus did not choose a woman to be one of the twelve. And this means women are not to have a public role in the church's leadership.

Because of the limitations of space and time, I am very much aware that this brief summary of the ordination debate cannot do justice to either side. Both sides engaged in long and careful exegesis of the Bible passages in dispute. My purpose is to demonstrate that in Canadian Lutheranism both sides grounded their case upon their interpretation of the Bible. In the debate on ordination of women, which has been waged in many circles outside of Canadian Lutheranism, there have been those who have affirmed that the ordination of women is right or wrong, and it does not matter what the Bible says on the subject. That attitude did not surface in the Canadian Lutheran debate.

The basic questions that emerge from this brief summary of the debate are these. 1. Do the different conclusions arrived at reveal a basically different way of approaching Scripture—a different hermeneutics—or are they equally legitimate attempts to apply the Bible to a subject which the Bible does not explicitly treat (i.e. the concept of ordination as we know it is a post-Biblical development)? 2. If the different conclusions flow from different hermeneutical approaches to the Bible, are the differences in approach involved sufficient reason for dividing churches and proof that consensus does not exist? 3. The work of the Division has proven that the differences of interpretation do not neatly follow the boundary lines of the three major Lutheran churches. There were and are many in the LCMS who either favor the ordination of women or who do not see it as a subject that should divide the churches. And in neither the ELCC nor the LCA was the vote for women's ordination unanimous. Therefore, we must ask whether, since these differences are within each of the existing churches, they should be a reason for keeping the churches from consensus with each other?

It seems to me that what is now needed is a thorough study of the different hermeneutical approaches. That has been done for the United States scene, but the results by no means can be transferred as an adequate description of the Canadian scene. I am convinced that part of our trouble in Canada has been that

far too often United States participants in our discussion have assumed mistakenly that the Canadian scene was the same as theirs. Now that we are on the verge of having the Canadian churches all autonomous, there is a real hope that we can work through these problems in light of our unique situation. The problem, however, is that with the demise of the Division of Theology there is no official group with a mandate to seek consensus among Canadian Lutherans. It is my hope that the task will not be shunted aside. Perhaps we have arrived at the stage where we need to renew the practice of free conferences or unofficial discussions which did prove helpful in the past. Personally, I cannot believe that we who bear alike the name "Lutheran" and who accept the sole authority of Scripture interpreted through the same Confessions can escape the need to seek consensus and a closer unity.

I began this paper by saying that it was my subjective recollection of my time in inter-Lutheran endeavors. In closing I would like to become even more personal. At the final meeting of the JCILR, when we finally closed up shop, I found a strange sense of identity with those with whom I disagreed. It has never been a secret that I was one who was deeply convinced that Scripture calls us to the ordination of women. In a column in the *Podium*<sup>4</sup> I affirmed that the ELCC and the LCA would not treat their ordained women as sacrificial lambs for the sake of Lutheran unity. My statement was branded as "emotional" by at least one person. Emotional or not, it described where I stood. At that last meeting of the JCILR when commissioners were affirming that their convictions would not allow them to pursue the quest further, I understood them and I sympathized with them, and I think they understood me and we were bound together in a strange way. Many times in JCILR meetings we had argued out our positions. I never could quite understand how they got what they did out of the Bible, and I know they could not understand how I got what I did. But now, as we came to the parting of the ways, we did sense a strange kinship to each other, the kinship of firm convictions and the determination to stand where we stood until proven wrong by Scripture. I think that the kinship I experienced there with my theological opponents is a kinship that exists among Lutherans despite their divisions. Some day, I am sure, Lutherans will have to come again to the task of seeking

that elusive consensus that has been sought these many long years in Canada.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Norman J. Threinen, *Fifty Years of Lutheran Convergence* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1983) is worth consulting for further details.
- <sup>2</sup> For full documentation see *Affirmation and Appeal... A Statement of Consensus* adopted by JCILR, 10 December 1970, pp. 1-32 (statement and commentary).
- <sup>3</sup> For the *Theses on the Holy Scriptures* and commentary, see Norman J. Threinen, ed., *Toward Union: Lutheran Merger Negotiations in Canada 1972-1978* (Winnipeg: Lutheran Council In Canada, 1979) 62-65.
- <sup>4</sup> *Podium* is a newsletter published occasionally by Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon.