

The Leprosy of Unionism



*By Dr. Theodore Graebner
- 1918 -*

(See "NOTE" at end of article)

In all the catalog of diseases there is no more awful scourge than leprosy. True leprosy is incurable. In Bible-times the lepers were considered, in a special sense, unclean. They were shut out from the temple, the synagogues, and to a large extent from the social life of their fellow-beings. Their lot was truly pitiable. The tubercular blotches on the skin, soon covering the cheeks, the nose, the lips, and the forehead; then the ulcers in the mouth, followed soon by the tubercles on the face, encrusted with discharge; the falling out of the eyebrows, the ulceration of feet and hands, the progressive loss of fingers and toes, then of arms and limbs made leprosy the most dreaded of all diseases. It ended usually by the onset of tuberculosis, or led to mental decay, idiocy, coma, and death.

There is a spiritual leprosy. We commonly call it unionism. Unionism is a diseased condition of the church. And it is a fatal disease. It ends in spiritual tuberculosis or a state of coma, the precursor of spiritual death. . . Moreover, and this makes the present subject so vital--we all have within us the germs of unionism.

(NOTE: Unionism is church fellowship without unity in doctrine and practice.)

I. THE GERMS

". . . *In my flesh dwelleth no good thing,*" (Romans 7:18) is the confession of Paul and of every Christian who knows his own heart. Pride, love of applause, and their counterparts, unwillingness to bear shame and reproach, these are the germs of unionism. And they are found in every human heart.

When we confess Christ, we must bear reproach. And we can confess Christ in no other way than by confessing the truth as He taught it. But confession of the truth by word of mouth is inseparable from confession by deed and practice. Even if there were no single text in Scripture which commands us to separate ourselves from those who deny any part of the truth, we should still, by inner necessity, if we are faithful disciples, bear witness against error through the testimony of withdrawal from false teachers and their followers. Jesus says that He has come *not to bring peace, but division*. (Luke 12:51) The Word divides those who are faithful from those who are unfaithful. And when Scripture

says: "*Be ye separate,*" (2 Corinthians 6:17), "*Avoid them,*" (Romans 16:17), these commands find a ready response in the attitude of the believer's heart. The Christian knows that false doctrine is sin.

But here our spirit is put to a sore test. Separation from those who teach falsely will inevitably expose us to slurs and bitter reproach: "Pharisees!" "Holier-than-thou Christians!" is hurled at us. "A loveless Christianity!" "Proud aloofness!" "Unchristian intolerance!" These are bitter words, and our flesh is weak; we are tempted to look for some means of escape from such reproach. And that is the entering wedge of unionism!

Satan sees his opportunity. "*Yea, hath God said?*" (Genesis 3:1) Doubts arise: "Is it really necessary to stand so uncompromisingly on details of doctrine? Are not some doctrines difficult to understand? Is it not reasonable to suppose that Christians may 'honestly differ,' because the Word of God 'has left some things obscure?' Why then be separate from those who at least hold the 'great essentials' of Christianity in common with us?"

We recognize the serpent's hiss and strike down the tempter with the Sword of the Spirit: "*It is written!*" (Matthew 4) The teachings of the Word of God are not a vague, luminous mist, but a clear, steady light. We re-examine the Scriptures and confess that in all its teachings the Bible is indeed, as Luther called it, "*The clearest book ever written.*" No, we cannot yield.

The simple words of Scripture are too powerful; the Truth is ours, and those who deny it depart from the evident sense of the inspired Word. There can be no compromise. "*Get thee behind me, Satan!*" (Matthew 16:23) Thus we can escape the infection.

II. THE EPIDEMIC

Without question, there is an epidemic of unionism raging in the body of Protestantism. There is an impatient demand: "Away with creeds; away with doctrine!" "The denominational wall must fall." "Christianity has no room for sects." This is the cry of so - called Christianity of our day.

Our Synodical Conference, of which the Missouri Synod is part, has so far stood four - square against unionism. Will it continue to stand? Will it resist the tremendous pressure exerted by those who plead for unity, regardless of doctrinal agreement. . . (Will it continue) to offset the inroads of unbelief, and to oppose aggression of Romanism? Will it remain 100% Lutheran?

(COMMENTARY: This article was written in 1918. Unfortunately, the questions must be answered in the negative. The Synodical Conference officially dissolved in 1967. It had succumbed to unionism!)

III. THE RAVAGES OF UNIONISM

Once we admit that the Word of God has not clearly spoken on points of Christian doctrine, and "the lid is off," faith

disintegrates, and rationalism rules. . . Unionism works just like leprosy. First the disfigurement--the entrance of unscriptural views and practices, then the decay of doctrinal preaching, followed by the sloughing off of one teaching after another, until the church-body is a walking death.

Behold the final state of such a church: Because they tolerated error in their midst and permitted their faithful churches and pastors to remain in fellowship with unfaithful churches and pastors, the representatives of the so-called conservative element of the Reformed Churches round about are helpless over against the inroads of unbelief. The official publishing house of the Methodists is publishing Sunday School literature which is absolutely unchristian. . . . Everywhere sectarian preachers are openly denying the very fundamentals of Christian doctrine. Churches are rapidly degenerating into agencies of political reform, and in many cases have given up even the pretense to a spiritual mission. Such churches are dying of spiritual tuberculosis, the final stage of spiritual leprosy--unionism.

IV. THE CURE

Unionism is a disease which is 100% fatal. The outward organization sometimes continued to exist after the spiritual life had flown, but Christ, the Life of the Church, was no longer there. His Spirit had fled the polluted sanctuary. In the days of Isaiah, the Jews had arrived at this stage. . .

True Christians there will always be where there are Bible-readers; but the organism dies. A church may be re-born, reformed, built up anew out of the debris of its former self, but that has ever been the case only after unionism had worked its final result, spiritual death. The place for unionistic Christianity is not the sanitarium, but the morgue.

V. PREVENTION

The Lutheran Church in the United States has not been immune to unionism in the past, and it is not immune today.

No one believes that any Missouri Synod man would dare to propose at this time (1918) official synodical collaboration with the Reformed sects in church-work. That is a late development at which one does not arrive at a jump. On the other hand, the danger is ever present that on the specious plea of advancing the cause of "Lutheranism," we be tempted to enter into fellowship with members of synods Lutheran in name, but only partly Lutheran in doctrine and practice. There is danger that we get a taste of applause and flattery; that we become eager for "recognition" as a great church-body; that we compromise our doctrinal stand for the purpose of meeting emergencies. And the time to become aware of that danger is NOW.

It is a bad sign when hearers become angry at their pastor for "preaching against other churches." It is a worse sign

when pastors, bowing to such disapproval, begin to withhold instructions concerning the errors of the sects. It is a most alarming symptom when pastors and parishioners fraternize. . . with those who represent a different conception of Lutheranism. It becomes denial of the Truth when they associate with such for the purpose of "making church-work more effective" or "keeping the Lutheran Church on the map."

As we love our church, let us so teach our people so that they will fear the contagion of error as they would fear to breathe the air of a small-pox hospital. Let us exhibit to them the damnableness of false doctrine. Let us preach Luther on this point, who saw only the work of Satan in every deviation from the truth of Scripture. If our people learn to recognize every false doctrine as a snare of the devil spread to catch victims for hell, they will not need to be held with a rein lest they stampede into unionism. . .

Let it be understood that any undertaking or activity which is, in effect, the doing of religious work jointly with those from whom we ought, according to Scripture to separate, is unionism. Here, if ever, the old sayings must apply: "Nip the evil in the bud." Our first duty is that of watchfulness. There is no higher duty now because there is no greater danger.

NOTE:

Dr. Theo Graebner, the author of this essay, was for many years a professor at Concordia Lutheran Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. He was a prolific writer and the author of many excellent books and treatises in which he clearly and boldly set forth the truth of Scripture on a variety of subjects. He proved himself a staunch defender of sound, conservative Lutheranism. This is evident also from this essay which appeared in the *LUTHERAN WITNESS*, the official organ of the Missouri Synod in 1918.

We regret that Dr. Graebner did not continue in this same firm position in the later years of his life. This, however does not affect the soundness of his former testimony, including also the fine witness he bears in the above article.

[This article was originally reproduced by the now sainted Rev. Waldemar Schuetze, at the time, pastor of Luther Memorial Church in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The undersigned retyped it and has added the Scripture references.]

Daniel Fleischer – 1995/2014(edit)

ADDENDUM:

"The more things change, the more they stay the same." Unionism has infected just about every church today, including Lutheran Churches. It is a continual threat to our own! It is essential for each of us to study and know the Bible, and its teachings. For unless we know what we believe we cannot speak. Unless we believe what we teach,

we will not have the will to stand up for it. We are called upon to proclaim the Truth in love. Conversely, it is not love if we do not speak the Truth.

The heart of all that the Lord has commissioned us to preach is the Gospel. The principle of fellowship set forth in Scripture serves the cause of the Gospel. Christians will practice the principle out of love for God and His Word. It is practiced for the sake of our children to whom we have a responsibility to pass on the Truth of God. It is practiced out of love for the neighbor to whom we are to witness in word and deed, “teaching them to observe all things” that the Lord has commanded (Matthew 28:20).

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