

Churching the Movement

Dr. Robert Bertram

[Address at the ELIM Assembly, Rosemont, Illinois, August 19, 1976.]

The practical upshot of what I have to say -- and I know from experience that you do expect your theologians to be practical -- can best be summarized by quoting from a letter I received a few days ago from one of you, a fellow member with me of AELC and ELIM. He writes, "I see a continuing need for ELIM . . . AELC and ELIM are not (or need not be) in competition with each other but are complementary." A similar quotation, at least as theological and to the same practical point, comes from Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. That quotation, too, was written by a fellow-confessor of ours whose church-body was determined to get rid of him but who still doggedly insisted, to that very church body, "For the true unity of the church it is enough [dies ist genug, satis est] to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments." Actually Melancthon swiped his line, as he confessed he did and as all good confessors do, from the Scriptures. The biblical line he swiped -- isn't that interesting? -- just happens to be this week's Epistle Lesson, Ephesians 4:5,6: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all." But how do we get from Ephesians 4 to my brother's good letter last week, from "one Lord, one faith" to "a continuing need for ELIM," an ELIM which does not compete with but complements AELC? That is a big order. But I know you also expect your theologians not to shirk controversial questions.

Tell me, sisters and brothers, what do we mean by "the confessional movement" which we hope to be -- or better, which we hope to be a part of? For on that much at least we do seem to be clear: the confessional movement, even the Lutheran confessional movement, is clearly bigger than ourselves. It is bigger by far than any one Lutheran denomination, whether LC-MS or LCM or AELC or ALC or LCA, bigger even than an intra-denominational group like ELIM. ELIM, in fact, is deliberately organized to make that point, that this movement does embrace co-confessors from all these denominations and from others besides. By saying the confessional movement is "bigger than" the denominational bodies, anyone of them or all of them together, we do not mean that it is more numerous, more sizable than they are. It may not be. We mean only that it is more basic, satis -- the sufficient common denominator, which is not the least common denominator but the biggest common denominator. The confessional movement really has no other calling except to go around saying that that one reality -- "one Lord, one faith," the one Gospel-and-Sacraments -- does indeed suffice. The confessional movement is what moves a new denomination like AELC to confess in its constitution that the Scriptures Christianly understood are "the only rule and norm," the one norm which is "enough." That is how basic and hence how universal the confessional movement is. And that movement, as the Missouri Synod is now learning to its hurt, is hardly a luxury.

Denominations by contrast cannot and should not be expected to so confine themselves to that exclusive confessional concern. By their very nature they have to add other concerns

as well, their own pension programs, their own educational systems, their own theological and liturgical heritages, precisely as they seek to carry out that one thing which is “enough” into their own specific missions and ministries. But in, with, and under these denominational diversities the confessional movement, by correcting here and applauding there, keeps up the churchly reminder that there really is only one thing that is enough. It is that common confessional witness which ELIM, as I believe we have understood it, has been organized to sound forth.

The faith which in the last few years we ELIMites have finally been driven to confess, here in this tiny denominational corner of Christendom are even here almost inaudibly, was quickly amplified for us into a public Christian outcry by thousands of other co-confessors irrespective of their different denominations -- not only from other Lutheran denominations but from those especially. That movement into which we have been gathered up and swept along now moves us to do our confessing in a new and more basic confessional fellowship which is no longer reducible to one denomination or to any combination of denominations. Con-fessing, as the first syllable of that word says, means Christians “fessing up” to their Lord together and paying the price for that together and reaping the joy from that together, however they may differ in other respects. They may differ on their exegesis of Genesis or Jonah, and yet differ out of the same confessional basis. They may disagree on whether Seminex should ever have left “801” and yet agree in supporting Seminex for the same confessional witness. They may argue over church polity or the ordination of women, all the while consenting to be corrected by that one thing needful and enough. Some of the very confessors who refuse to leave Missouri for AELC and who would rather fight than switch are the self-same ones who help pay the start-up expenses of AELC to insure a united witness. Confessing is faith finding friends, even when they may sound like foes.

ELIM, which has always denied that it is a separate denomination, is an attempt rather to embody the confessional movement organizationally. To do so, it has had to run to keep up. May it keep running, only now in the direction of greater involvement with other Lutherans (at least) and with them in its leadership, beginning at the grass roots. A Seminex colleague calls that next phase “ELIM-2.” But by whatever new name it travels, let it remember that it has already been given enough headstart that it dare not now resign its future to some other, less comprehensive organization. ELIM is not the whole confessional movement, obviously. Still, it is already such a part of that movement that its only reason for existing is to point to the whole, to what alone is “enough.” That is the surest way ELIM has for not competing with but complementing AELC or any other denominational body.

Not that AELC is not needed. On the contrary, I believe it is an urgent necessity, even if only a temporary one. It is a necessary transition for those among us who have had to sever all connections with their former denomination, the Missouri Synod, and who are temporarily without denominational ministries of their own. But even so, AELC will in that case only be replacing one denomination with another. No doubt this time it will be a healthy and thriving denomination in place of a corrupted and dying one. Nevertheless, even at its potential best, AELC will still have to concentrate its attention upon its own denominational needs. Like other denominations also, other excellent denominations, its first concerns must be with its own members, its own programs of mission and ministry, its own urgent need of funding.

But exactly to that extent AELC will have to give lesser priority to the ministries, the sufferings, the witnessing of Christians outside its own organizational boundaries, even though they confess the same Christian faith as we do, and even do so perhaps by means of the same Lutheran Confessions and the same Lutheran liturgies and out of the same Lutheran history and, what is more, may even practice that same confession on our own very doorsteps, in the same country and cities and neighborhoods as we do. No matter what “altar and pulpit fellowship” our new denomination may enter into with their denominations, they will still have to be, to one extent or another, outside the bounds of our immediate denominational fellowship. That is a fact of denominational life.

We in the AELC have seemed to expect that this new organization of ours will now have to take over all that ELIM had set out to be, as if our very right to existence as a new denomination depended on that. But that is an unfair expectation of AELC, and our consciences ought not be burdened with a task which a denomination alone is not really in a position to carry. Yet we have not been altogether clear about that. For example, AELC has been criticized for not including in its membership Lutherans from LCA and ALC. I myself have been party to that criticism, and I was wrong, for I too was still assuming that AELC was expected to be a one-for-one replacement of ELIM, a whole intra-Lutheran confessional association. So what did we do? Being eager to avoid any appearance of exclusiveness, we took pains to insert appropriate reassurances in our proposed AELC constitution. We have stated there that membership in AELC is open to all “members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,” indeed to “any congregation of baptized Christians,” who are committed to AELC’s purposes. But that seems to ignore the fact that most of the Christians on this continent who are indeed committed to those identical purposes do already have denominations of their own for carrying those purposes out. It is no wonder, therefore, that our organizational meetings of AELC have not been over-run by, much less spearheaded by non-Missourians. That is not due merely to the fact that these folks have not been invited; in some cases they have been. But they know, and in our bones so do we know, that they already have pension programs, mission programs, programs of theological education of their own, which they see no need to duplicate in still another denomination. By our even intimating that they should, we are over-asking them and in the process are placing needless strains on AELC’s own credibility.

On the other hand, what these Lutherans from other denominations do show an interest in is something which AELC is likewise committed to, namely, “to promote and participate fully in any and all expressions of confessional Lutheran unity.” But isn’t that exactly what ELIM has begun to be, and what “ELIM-2” could be more and more, an “expression of confessional Lutheran unity” across denomination lines? In the meantime what AELC can promise quite honestly, and can promise as a denomination, is what Dr. Thomas Spitz promised the recent convention of LCA: that the AELC, as soon as it has gotten itself together, will put itself out of business as a separate denomination in the interest of larger Lutheran consolidation. I find that prospect for AELC not only manageable but downright exciting, enough so to want to re-name AELC “Approaching Eventual Lutheran Consolidation.” For the time being, however, that development will have to be postponed. In ELIM, on the other hand, an intra-Lutheran confessional organization is already under way.

There is also another area where we have been expecting AELC to take over an intra-denominational function which cannot fairly be expected of it, a function however which really does fit well into a confessional organization like ELIM. I refer to the question, how to embrace in the same confessional association both those who leave the Missouri Synod and join the AELC, and do so as a matter of witness, and also those who continue their witness, the same confessional witness, inside the Missouri Synod? AELC simply cannot be expected to serve both Missourians and ex-Missourians with equal justice. For, committed as AELC is to witnessing by leaving -- and that is one valid witness -- AELC is at a loss for encouraging those who witness by staying. And so because these co-confessors still in Missouri do not fit easily into the designs of AELC, the temptation is to take out our frustration upon them instead and to have them bear the onus. They are then the ones for whom we feel we have to make excuse. We explain that they are “not yet” to the point where we are, not yet, implying that they are slow to read the handwriting on the wall and to get out while getting is good. As if they did not know what is in store for them, as surely they do know -- many of them do -- and have chosen to bear that cross and, if need be, to go down with it. Or as our literature explains, they are not “able” to leave, as if their staying must be some form of weakness or some unfortunate impediment. As if the same Holy Spirit who has enabled our witness could not also be enabling theirs. Friends, this sort of put-down of some of our nearest and dearest co-confessors is not only un-churchly and divisive, as even LCA and ALC Lutherans are telling us it is. There is also no need of it, not as long as we recognize that our new denomination, AELC, need not be overburdened with an inclusiveness which it cannot provide and which ELIM can and does provide. Perhaps AELC’s new English Synod did right after all by frankly not pretending to include those who remain in Missouri but by offering instead to stay in other forms of confessional fellowship with them. And what other form do we have at present that continues such a bold identification with those in Missouri as ELIM does? And I know ALC and LCA Lutherans who are ready to join that identification with them.

Similarly that related problem, how AELC can accommodate individuals (as opposed to whole congregations), is one which ELIM solves reasonably well. There may be thousands of such individuals who do not wish to abandon either their stand against Missouri’s legalism or the Missouri congregations they have been given to love. So far our AELC constitutions have been able to promise these individuals only a kind of second-class membership and a probationary one at that. ELIM, which does much better by them than that, is the place for bringing these isolated co-confessors together into what Luther called the “mutual conversation and consolation of brothers [and sisters],” reinforcing one another’s witness wherever they have to give it. In no case dare we dissolve ELIM out from under these fellow-Christians in Missouri in hopes that that would force them into AELC. If we stoop to that sort of coercion, then AELC will be as little blessed as wretched Missouri now is.

The hope we can see before us, and that hope must be seized to be seen, is for a confessional movement of which you and I are already a part through the first, faltering phase called ELIM. By whatever name it now chooses to go, it already has the makings of an intra-Lutheran confessional organization. And organization -- may I say to those who are anti-organization -- is imperative, even though the American denomination may not provide the only denominational model, especially not if denominations cannot encompass their co-

confessors. ELIM, too, will need continually to review its organization. But already it has a precedent and some small experience in organizing not along denominational but along confessional lines. It will need to do much more of the same.

I hope ELIM will give new attention to local and regional groupings, not only because regionalism happens to be the national mood of the moment but also because it is at the regional level where so much shared confessing of the faith across denominational lines is already going on -- in local Lutheran high-school associations, in metropolitan church papers, in social and campus ministries, in transfer of congregational members, in sharing of pastoral services, in calling graduates of one another's seminaries and teacher-training schools, in coming to one another's defense, also financially, and most promising of all, in mutual admonition and suffering.

A confessional organization as ELIM is on the way to being has no need to displace denominations or to duplicate them, much less to cultivate within them little cliques of super-confessional elitists. It needs only to call attention by its public presence to that common confessing which is already going on inside our various denominational bodies and by its own confessional organization to give prominence to that -- that common confessing of the one faith in that one Lord who is not ashamed to confess us together before his Father. Isn't that what the movement is about, to confess throughout the church that "this is enough?"

Robert W. Bertram