

For the

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Confessions in a Non-Confessional World - p.4

**On the Councils and the Church:
Luther on Reform, Government,
and Institutions of the Church - p.7**

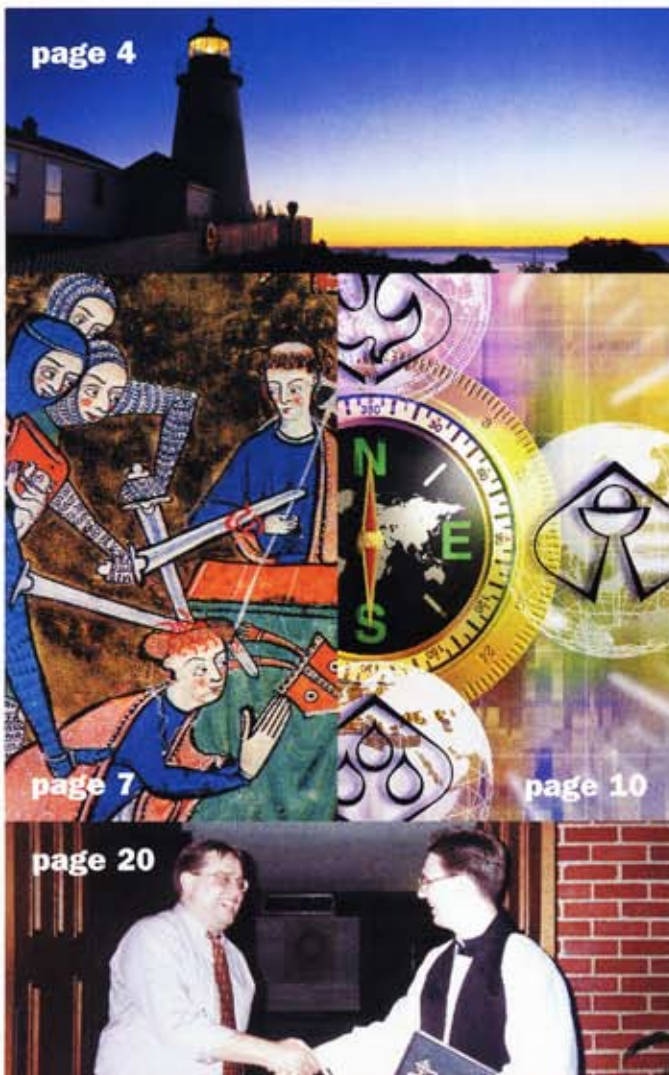
The "Marks" of the Church - p.10

In the Field - p.20



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CONTENTS



For the **LIFE** of the **WORLD**

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FEATURES

4 **Confessions in a Non-Confessional World**

By Dr. Max Kiesling, Member of Crown of Life Lutheran Church, San Antonio, Tex.

We are living in an increasingly "non-confessional" world. It is a reality that has a strong hold on society at large, and is increasingly afflicting the Christian church. As Christians, our foundational beliefs should be defined and understood first, followed by the proclamation of those beliefs in the world around us. To reverse this process by letting our daily contact with the world influence our foundational beliefs would be dangerous, if not fatal.

7 **On the Councils and the Church: Luther on Reform, Government, and Institutions of the Church**

By the Rev. Prof. Roland F. Ziegler, Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

There was never an age where the church was unanimous, where there was no strife and struggle, where everybody lived in peace and harmony. Reading the New Testament shows us congregations loaded with problems. Any study of church history gives us a picture of a church in distress. And how else could it be in this world, in this age, where sin is still here, where the devil still tries to destroy God's holy Church through false doctrine and temptation to a sinful life?

10 **The "Marks" of the Church**

By the Rev. Dr. Kurt E. Marquart, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

The marks of the Church mean that we are to be guided by faith, not by sight, in dealing with the church. In the church, it is above all truth and truth alone that counts—not numbers or prestige or pleasant relations. Where the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are rightly administered, there Christ's Church is rightly and properly represented.

20 **In the Field**

By Monica Robins

Featuring the Rev. Christopher Esget, Pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Va.

On the Councils and the Church:

Luther on Reform, Government, and Institutions of the Church

By the Rev. Prof. Roland F. Ziegler



Any study of church history gives us a picture of a church in distress. And how else could it be in this world, in this age, where sin is still here, where the devil still tries to destroy God's holy Church through false doctrine and temptation to a sinful life?

In almost everybody there is a certain tendency of romanticism. There is this look at a past, where things were better. Maybe it is in one's personal life, or at some point of history where life seems to have been better or more exciting than our daily life right now and here. People reenact the Middle Ages, the renaissance, the Civil War, playfully sometimes, and sometimes out of a deep longing for a golden age.

There is also a variation of this romanticism in Christianity. Christians who see the heroes of the faith in the past and compare them with what appears to them a far less appealing present long for the good old times—it might be the Jerusalem of the apostles, the Wittenberg of Luther and Melancthon, the St. Louis of C. F. W. Walther and Francis Pieper, or another time and place. But there was never this age where the church was unanimous, where there was no strife and struggle, where everybody lived in peace and harmony. Reading the New Testament shows us congregations loaded with problems. Any study of church history gives us a picture of a church in distress. And how else could it be in this world, in this age, where sin is still here, where the devil still tries to destroy God's holy Church through false doctrine and temptation to a sinful

life? But how do you deal with the problems of the Church? How can you fight heresy and how can you stop new and strange ideas of what is the proper godly behavior of a Christian?

One of the answers given in the course of the history of the church is that councils decide points at issue. Councils were assemblies of bishops, either of a certain area, or of all Christian countries, the so-called ecumenical councils

(ecumenical means here universal, it has nothing to do with the modern ecumenical movement). There is an impressive series of these ecumenical councils, starting with the Council at Nicea 325.

In the late Middle Ages there was a universally-felt need for reform in the Roman Catholic Church. So several "reform councils" met, but they did not succeed. One of the reasons was that the Pope sabotaged any efforts to diminish his power. And, as it is often in organizations, the bureaucracy won against boards that meet only from time to time. When the Reformation movement started, the urge for a council became even greater. But the Pope was busy waging war against the emperor. When there was finally peace, a council was announced, and then postponed, and then transferred, and then again postponed,

and after that delayed and so on, since the Pope did not want to have a meeting that was not under his total control. This went on for 14 years, and only after Luther's death was there finally a council in Trent. But it was no fair hearing, no free council, but an assembly in which the Pope set and controlled the agenda. Lutherans were not even admitted for a hearing.

During that time when a reform council was announced and postponed, Luther wrote a large treatise "On the Councils and the Church." He did a lot of research on the history of the first four ecumenical councils (Nicea 325, Constantino-

ple 381, Ephesus 430, and Chalcedon 451), reading the ancient church historians and a collection of the resolutions of these councils to find out what the original meaning and purpose of the councils were and what that meant for the reform and government of the church in his time.

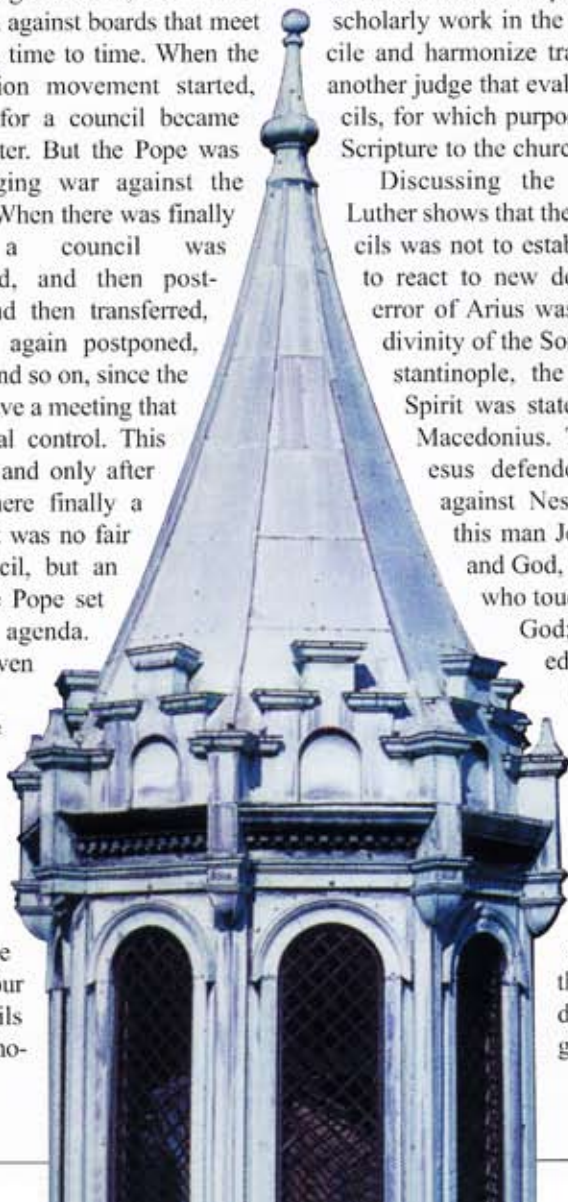
The first question Luther discussed was the formal authority of councils and the church fathers in the church. Are they authorities in the sense that they can establish binding decisions in addition to what is stated in Holy Scripture? Luther says no, and he quotes in favor of his position Augustine, the church father for him, who said that only the canonical Scriptures are inerrant, while writings by men, however pious these fathers might be, are not on the same level. Luther claims therefore, that he is faithful to the tradition of the church by *subordinating* this tradition to Holy Scripture, and that his adversaries who make tradition a source of doctrine and ethics are *not* in agreement with the fathers. Also, since councils and fathers do not agree with each other in all issues, especially questions of church order—a point that led to intense scholarly work in the Middle Ages to reconcile and harmonize tradition—there must be another judge that evaluates fathers and councils, for which purpose God has given Holy Scripture to the church.

Discussing the four main councils, Luther shows that the purpose of these councils was not to establish anything new, but to react to new doctrines. In Nicea, the error of Arius was rejected, and the full divinity of the Son was asserted. In Constantinople, the divinity of the Holy Spirit was stated against the error of Macedonius. The Councils of Ephesus defended the true old faith against Nestorius, confessing that this man Jesus Christ is true man and God, united, so that anybody who touches Christ has touched God; and Chalcedon asserted

also this true unity of Christ. After going through these assemblies of the church, Luther concludes that the doctrines they asserted in this time were nothing but the doctrine of Holy Scripture, that they neither wanted nor actually did state anything that goes beyond Scripture.



Councils, in the true sense of the early Church, are therefore nothing else than courts, like courts in the civil realm, to solve disputes. But unlike in the civil realm where the laws on which the courts base their decision are changing, there is an unchanging base for evaluating disputes in the church: Holy Scripture.



Councils, in the true sense of the early church, are therefore nothing else than courts, like courts in the civil realm, to solve disputes. But unlike in the civil realm where the laws on which the courts base their decision are changing, there is an unchanging base for evaluating disputes in the church: Holy Scripture. The true work of a council is, per Luther, to anathematize, that is, to reject and condemn new teachings and to assert and restate the true old doctrine; also to condemn all newly-thought-out works and ways and stick to God's vision of the Christian life as it is given in Scripture. That sounds harsh, even reactionary, but it is grounded in a realistic view of the church and her history. The faith that has been once delivered to the saints (Jude 3) is attacked, and one of the human traits used by the adversary is human fickleness and the curiosity for "something new," the kind of mindset that Paul describes as having "itching ears" (2 Tim. 4:3). The idea of progress is still very strong in our times, but it is not a model to understand the church on her way through history. She is but waiting for one revelation: The revelation of her returning Lord. That something is "new" does not mean that it is good or better, and in the realm of the church the "new" has to show its identity with the one true faith, which is "old" in the sense that it was before us, given to us by Christ in His Word. What is really new in theology is *by definition* wrong because it is not contained in Scripture.

Luther envisions a council as an assembly of people who are thoroughly versed in Holy Scripture and are seriously concerned with God's honor, the Christian faith, the salvation of souls, and the peace of the world. These would be all pastors. But Luther also wants to include some intelligent and reliable laypersons. This council would have about 300 members, so that it could function better than huge gatherings can. Its main purpose would be to judge present churchly practice according to the Word of God and to denounce all teachings and customs that stand against the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Conflicts and debates in and between congregations should not be brought to this council. Even if such a council was not possible for the entire church, Luther hopes that a local council for Germany might be possible, but he knows that, humanly speaking, there was no chance because the opponents would never agree to a council that was not subject to the authority of the Pope.

So what is the alternative? Since there is no possibility to solve the disputes in the way of a free assembly, work can only be done on the local level. In parishes and schools, the article of justification has to be preached and preserved against

new and foreign teachings. That is the best that can be done. For everything else, "let us commend the matter to the true judge, our merciful God."

In the last part of his treatise, Luther discusses the nature of the church. It has become obvious that the church is not an organization headed by the Pope, deriving its legitimacy from an unbroken tradition. The tradition is broken; the church that is under the Pope is not the early church of the first five centuries. Neither is the church an organization headed by a council, since also councils can make and have made mistakes. What then is the church? Luther does not like the word since it is a word of foreign origin, and it does not convey the true meaning. The Church for him is defined by the Creed as "the communion of saints," a crowd or assembly of people who are Christians. Thus, he can paraphrase this sentence as "I believe that there is a holy Christian people."

This holiness is not primarily a moral quality, a blameless life, but this holiness is, first and foremost, worked by the Holy Spirit when He gives faith in Christ and thus sanctifies people. The sanctifying action of the Spirit includes also a renewal of mankind, since the Spirit sanctifies us so that we, also, in our relations with our neighbors, live in love. Where is the true Church to be found? If we imagine the Holy Spirit working directly from heaven without any means, there can be no Church found here on earth, only individual believers. But this is not at all Luther's understanding of the operation of the Holy Spirit. There are *marks* of the Church, and the most prominent and important marks whereby the Church is identified are the means, created things, by which the Spirit comes to men, the means of creating and sustaining a holy people. The marks of the true Church that Luther mentions are the preached Word of God, baptism, the sacrament of the altar, the office of the keys, the consecration or calling of ministers (*Luther's Works* 41:148-168), prayer, and suffering. Therein is the origin and the continuity of the Church.

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