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## BRIDGES WHICH ARE NOT TOO SHORT

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### BAPTISTS AND LUTHERANS IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC\*

Three years ago, some Baptist women taking part in an ecumenical discussion group not far from Berlin made an amazing discovery. Because that year saw the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, celebrated throughout the world, the minister of the host church gave an introductory talk about the development, content and importance of this Lutheran Confession. Every member of the group was given a hymnbook of the church because most Lutheran hymnbooks have the text of the Augsburg Confession printed in them. This made for easy reference to the text and enabled them to read it together. In order to grasp the effect of this lecture on the Baptist women, we must say something concerning the time of the Reformation, the foundations of Continental Baptist history and also the powerful and welcome change which has taken place in the relation between our churches and the experience that we have had of one another. Hence this following necessary glance back into our history.

#### Since the Reformation the ways have been divided

In the year 1530, seven princedoms and two free cities of the Holy Roman Empire of Charles V presented to the Imperial Diet at Augsburg their Protestant Confession, the so-called Augsburg Confession. Thus for the second time a small group of Protestants came before an Imperial Diet of a Catholic power to validate the Reformation. The arch-Catholic Emperor would have long since solved the 'Protestant question' militarily, if he had not been prevented by the continuous threat of the Turks who were already in Hungary and by the necessity of waging war against the French. Philip Melanchthon had this threat of danger from the Emperor in mind when he drew up the Confession. The reproach of heresy must in all circumstances be refuted or the very life of the Protestants would be in danger. To this end, he went as far as he could to resolve the most controversial questions between Rome and Wittenberg and emphasized their common theological positions. In his subsequent notes to the Confession he went so far that Luther, who for security reasons did not come to Augsburg, wrote to him, despite their general agreement in principle, saying: 'Satan lives still and has well understood how to tread softly in your *apologia*'. In order to protect the Protestant movement and to show his own orthodoxy, Melanchthon lumped together all their common enemies *en masse* and condemned them as heretics. Conspicuous among these the 'Anabaptists' were often named. They were at first followers of Luther, Melanchthon, Bucer and Zwingli, whom they honoured as rediscoverers of biblical truth. But what the Reformers in their dealings with Catholic errors had made into a principle, the Anabaptists had realized. They accepted only the authority of Holy Scripture. They formed their congregations

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\* This article has been kindly translated by the Rev. E. H. Robertson.

of believers, practised the priesthood of all believers, believers' baptism and church discipline. Thus they went further than Luther, Zwingli and the other Reformers, who held fast to the medieval state-church structures of the *corpus christianum* and consequently accepted its necessary presuppositions that baptism was for children. With this acceptance of infant baptism by the Reformers, the way of the Anabaptists separated from theirs.

From the first baptism of believers after the Middle Ages, 21st January 1525 in Zurich, up to the time of the Imperial Diet in Augsburg (1530), thousands of Anabaptists had already been exiled, beheaded, drowned and burnt. The Augsburg Confession, with its condemnation of the Anabaptists, now also from the Protestant side, provided a theological justification for the bloody persecutions by the secular power. The suffering or death of the Anabaptists continued with the approval and agreement of the theological professor of Wittenberg, Dr Martin Luther. Anabaptists were also drowned in the Elbe, no so far from Wittenberg. The Anabaptist movement in Germany was totally destroyed by inhuman and merciless persecution.

#### The Continental Baptist Movement also began as a Suffering Movement

The influences of pietism and enlightenment in the following centuries, however, brought ideas of tolerance and religious freedom to the fore. But despite this, as the history of the English Baptists as well as the history of the German Baptists shows (the first congregation was founded in Hamburg in 1834), the progress was by way of suffering. Infants were snatched from their parents by Protestant pastors with the help of the police, and forcibly baptized; Bible colporteurs were ill-treated and thrown into prison, school teachers who were baptized as believers were dismissed from their posts, and many Baptists had their possessions confiscated as a punishment for attending meetings.

It was, however, impossible to stop the growth of the Baptist movement on the Continent. Fifteen years after the founding of the first congregation, there were Baptist missionaries in Sweden, Poland, Hungary, Austria and Holland. In fifteen months the 2,000 Baptists from Germany distributed 20,000 Bibles and 800,000 tracts.

Because the persecution did not lessen, hundreds of men from the Evangelical Alliance in many different European countries approached the German government towards the middle of the century, calling for freedom for the oppressed. Among them, from England, were Lord Shaftesbury, Sir A. Malet and Dr Steane of London. They were rarely successful. Incited by Protestant pastors, sober citizens threw stones at the windows of their Baptist neighbours or banded themselves together to break up their assemblies. Because weddings conducted by Baptist pastors were not recognized by law, the couples were reckoned to be living in sin. In many cases, Baptists were forbidden burial in the cemeteries, or they were pushed into the corner reserved

for suicides. Under this intolerable pressure, many German Baptists emigrated to America. It was not until the turn of the century that the pressure eased.

Today, all is changed

Since then, the situation has totally changed. Our Union, with its 20,700 members, is respected as a 'little brother' in the great family of the Council of Churches. This Council (or working fellowship) supports ecumenical relationships and theological discussion, promotes understanding between its members in matters of different interpretations and makes joint approaches to the authorities possible. Pastor Manfred Sult, as president of our Union, belongs to the Conference of Church Leaders which meets once a year for an exchange of views and to confer. With the highest percentage contribution, our Union takes part in the annual appeal for Christian Aid, called in Germany 'Bread for the World'. Our General Secretary, Rolf Dammann, is one of the executive representatives on the Distribution Committee. A short while ago, he handed over to an African State the contents of an aeroplane laden with aid from the German Democratic Republic (G.D.R.). An exceptionally good example of cooperative work by our churches is the social work done in Germany itself through deaconesses and others. This *Diakonia* coordinates and supports the joint work for health and social welfare. It includes fifty-one Christian hospitals, hundreds of nursing homes and old people's homes, 326 nursery schools and 90 homes for the physically and mentally handicapped. The support of church building schemes also belongs to the work of this *Diakonia*.

In the field of publishing there is also a whole range of useful possibilities for cooperative work.

An unusual situation arises in the Press Service of the Protestant churches (ENA). This was started by a Baptist. The leading Protestant publishing firm is directed by a Baptist. Our Theological Seminary in Buckow maintains contact with the Protestant theological seminaries and with the theological faculties of the universities. Guest lecturers are invited from both sides and joint meetings of teachers arranged.

The Protestant working group for the care of drug addicts (AGAS), with its retreats and pastoral discussion groups working in many parts of the country, has a busy working party on which our pastors and members also take active part. Furthermore, we belong to the Council for Protestant Missions, in which such missionary societies as the Leipzig Mission, the Moravian Mission, the Berlin Mission, the Christoffel Mission to the Blind, are able to work together. Even though at present we are unable to send missionaries of our own, we are through this Council able to take part in the development of world mission.

It goes without saying that pastors of our Union belong to Evangelistic conferences and other outreach groups. An evangelist from one of the Protestant churches said to me, that our congregations with their continuing habit of missionary work are a constant encouragement to them to undertake evangelisation and an indispensable and lively exhortation, not to forget the command of Jesus to preach the gospel to every creature.

And so I could go on with the cooperative work among Christian young people, Christian youth music, local church choirs, taking part with others in Christian broadcasting, etc.

So far, I have spoken mostly of the institutional forms of our relationships. But those relationships are only as good as the experience of the individual Christian. So we need to ask what happens outside the many committees.

It is in the field of charitable work that we see the most richly blessed working out of our good relations. That personal dealings between individuals are richly blessed cannot be stressed too often. But also in other areas of work, the good relations are evident and widely experienced.

Some years ago, we had the help of the Protestant churches in facing questions of social and political ethics. Traditionally, we Baptists are inexperienced in this field. To our shame it must be said that during the Nazi period we betrayed our principles as Free Churches. Even though we do not glamourize the Protestant movement known as the 'Confessing Church', we have to admit that no such movement occurred among us at that time. Today, in our churches, and particularly in our youth work, questions of peace, disarmament and social justice are dealt with, even when we come up against difficulties: the young people are satiated with a too superficial and one-sided presentation of these problems in school and university.

Further, there are significant indications when Protestant Bishops take part in our assemblies and bring greetings from other churches or when Baptist music groups play at the congresses of the Protestant State Church. Another sign of good fellowship is when young people take part, not only in their own Bible camps, but also join in those organized by other churches. In Berlin, every autumn, there is a Youth Sunday for the whole city, held in the Alliance Hall with 2,500 participants. It is prepared and carried through jointly.

In the youth work of our churches material is widely used which comes from our Protestant State Church. And on the other hand their work among young workers is aided by tracts written by Baptist authors. The same occurs with the popular monthly missionary-orientated magazine *Frohe Botschaft* (Joyful Message). It regularly contains articles written by Baptists.

But what we give is relatively small and bears no relation to what we receive.

The bookstalls in our churches, the rows of books in our homes, the libraries of our pastors would be immeasurably poorer without the broad spectrum of books from different Protestant presses.

Every year towards the end of August, the Blankenburg Alliance Congress is held in the Thuringian holiday town of Bad Blankenburg, with 5,000 participants meeting for four days. Only those who have experienced this Congress with its bible studies, with its time of greetings (particularly important for us), its evangelical service, can understand our enthusiasm for

it. The participants are for ever talking about this outstanding event in the Christian life of the G.D.R. Ask the Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance (Gordon Landreth). He has experienced such days in Bad Blankenburg. And remember, too, that the Director of the Alliance House there and the present Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance in the G.D.R. are both Baptist pastors.

The Universal Week of Prayer each year in January is celebrated in most of the towns in the G.D.R. and this is prepared by the Alliance.

It goes without saying that our churches and halls are mutually at one another's disposal. On the occasion of the presentation of great choral works, the choirs of the different churches work together. In many places our pastors participate in the pastors' conferences of the State Church on a regular basis. There are individual churches with which we regularly have joint work - particularly youth work - and this cooperation shows how happily things have changed. God has worked in our relationship to one another. It is a great gift of God that we can come out into the open with the united witness to the One Lord. It is not unusual for us to preach in one another's churches. A memorable event occurred last autumn, when Billy Graham stood in Martin Luther's church in Wittenberg, in the pulpit, and appealed to people to follow Christ.

In such a way have the times changed. There are today many living inter-relationships. Now, we can understand the surprise of those Baptist women in that ecumenical discussion group, as they suddenly discovered in the pages of the Protestant hymnbook that according to the Augsburg Confession they were for ever damned as 'Anabaptists'. For the anathema has remained valid - theoretically - for 450 years!

The women told what they found and thought. The host pastor of the State Church was very embarrassed as he suddenly became aware of the crass contradiction between the present practice and the still valid doctrine. He wrote at once to his church authority and urged the setting up of a joint theological commission to clarify the problem. The three major church bodies reacted with a public declaration on 22nd June 1980:

The outspoken anathemas in this Confession (particularly as regards the Anabaptists) could with the passage of time be judged differently by us today. In so far as in our time we have known continuous fellowship with those groups, whose views are condemned by the Augsburg Confession, we should enter into theological discussion to test whether the outspoken judgements then made still hold today in our attitude to the doctrine of these separated brethren. We are ready for such a discussion.

The three bodies issuing that declaration are the Federation of Protestant Churches, the Protestant Church of the Union and the United Protestant Lutheran Church, which together represent 7½ million members in a population of 17 million.

The Work of the Joint Theological Commission

In June 1982, the joint theological Commission held the first of four meetings, to which four members of the Baptist Union were invited to belong. Never before has such open discussion been held on this theme. God gave us a spiritual atmosphere in which we could with the greatest frankness set forth our opposing views, and we were in fact asked to do so. Never once was there a sense of irritation.

Both sides were at one in a highly critical assessment of the open anathemas of the Augsburg Confession. The Wittenberg Reformers had seen the origin of the Anabaptist views, as well as their spiritual roots, in the Zwickau Prophets, in Thomas Müntzer and in Karlstadt. But apart from this historic source, there is today an independent movement to be found, spreading out from Zurich, separately, with a spiritual mysticism and militant enthusiasm. These are Baptist movements of a charismatic kind in the Protestant churches.

This led in the course of the discussion to the conclusion that the anathemas in articles V, XIII, XVI and XVII of the Augsburg Confession did not apply to the churches of our Union.

The discussions, parts of which should now be outlined, were concentrated therefore above all on Article IX: 'Of baptism, it should be taught that it is necessary and that by it grace is received. One should also baptize children, who by baptism are offered to God and will be received by Him. Therefore the Anabaptists are to be condemned, who teach that infant baptism is not right'.

With great earnestness, it was said to us that our brothers and sisters in the Protestant churches are deeply wounded by the fact that we Baptists do not recognize infant baptism as baptism. That did not leave us unmoved. But to the charge of re-baptism, we must reply as did the Anabaptists in the Middle Ages, that believers' baptism can in no way be described as re-baptism, because infant baptism is no baptism in the New Testament sense. Examples were quoted to us from Sweden, Sri Lanka, India, and England, where those baptized as infants were received into membership of Baptist churches by confession of faith, without believers' baptism. Why should it be impossible in the G.D.R., when elsewhere it is openly practised by those who confess Baptist doctrine? We replied that according to our belief, while this may be good pastoral practice, it was not based upon biblical theology. With many different practical questions we pointed out the complex problem of recognizing infant baptism: In such a 'mixed church', what would be preached as the biblical doctrine of baptism? What would happen in such a church if a member who had been baptized as a child, in later years was troubled in his conscience and desired believers' baptism? What does that unclear formulation mean, which I found in the constitution proposed for a union of Baptist and Lutheran churches: 'the bishop must as pastor and teacher do all that is possible to help these people', in all circumstances? But it was not the practical questions, but the question of what the Bible says, that mostly occupied us.

To our great surprise, the Protestant theologians agreed as one, that infant baptism cannot be derived directly from the evidence of the New Testament. In the light of our common standard, *sola scriptura*, as children of the Reformation, we expressed our continuing displeasure with a church of that Reformation whose practice of baptism is derived not from the Bible, but from human, ecclesiastical, soteriological and other traditions. In answer to this attack, we were accused of subscribing to an unhistorically-minded biblicism, but we insisted that there are biblical patterns and sequences, such as proclamation—belief—baptism. An important argument against our position, the following was put forward: 'What you say holds for a missionary situation, such as is described in the New Testament. For Christian families with new-born children, the matter is quite different'. But were there not in the first century already Christian families of the second and even third generation? Despite this we do not hear that they baptized their new-born infants.

A further argument used by our partners in this discussion was the proof from accepted use: 'What the majority of Christians have practised so long cannot be false'. But the argument could not be used for infant baptism. It is not only in the Bible that we find no infant baptism; it first appeared half a millennium later against the objections of leading church teachers.

It is interesting to see how the question of baptism is still causing concern in the state churches through Bible study today - without any Baptist propaganda!

A basic disagreement in the discussion of the baptism question consists in whether baptism is a sacrament or not, i.e. whether in it God deals with man, redeems him and grants him salvation - or whether all this does not belong to hearing the message, understanding and accepting it, and being born again. In this latter case, the baptism that follows is the answer of the faithful, officially received with blessing into the congregation.

If baptism signifies the granting of salvation, how can Paul in his carefully written Letter to the Romans, set forth salvation without mentioning baptism? In Romans 5.1, he sums up: 'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ'. If God binds his salvation to the act of baptism, how can the language of baptism not appear on every other page of the New Testament, while on other pages 'faith' is omnipresent?!

Luther taught the *fides infantium*, the faith of the immature child, because, as he said, a sacrament without faith is not valid. Today, we have moved away from the faith of the immature child. This view is no longer represented in the Protestant church. Instead, one says: 'The faith necessary for the validity of infant baptism is in the faith of the congregation, the family and the parents, in the hope that later it will be taken up by the baby as his own faith'.

That led us to think: What if the baby baptized does not come to believe until he is 50 years old, was he then a member of the church without Christ for 50 years? What kind of a hair-splitting

philosophy is this and what practical sense does it make to say that infant baptism is 'real' baptism, but it is first made 'real' when later the infant acquires his own faith?

The fact that in a Protestant church of 6,000 souls scarcely 80 come to Sunday worship has a deep-lying cause! An incessant stream of people, who have not been inwardly renewed, into the church - this creates problem upon problem. In our discussion, both sides were clear that in the matter of infant baptism or believers' baptism we were dealing with an either-or situation. This alternative has a wide context. Behind it lie different understandings of the work of the Holy Spirit, of being and becoming a Christian, of the church of Jesus and its offices, and of mission and evangelisation.

#### The Brotherly No

What result can we show at the end of our discussions? Has not the rift between us deepened? We have firmly established where we stand. Clarity is good. We have learnt how to speak openly with one another, however controversial our statements are. Instead of 450 years of anathema, we have learnt the 'brotherly No'. We have been deeply moved to hear our partners in the discussion ask forgiveness of God and man openly. This discussion has also led us Baptists to self-examination. In I John 1.8 we read: 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us'. In our ranks too there have been untrue and distorted images presented of other churches. In our controversies we have often forgotten that within the state churches too God has worked his spiritual riches among brothers and sisters, in families and in congregations. How often we have taken for granted the welfare work, housing and support, the handling of social questions. The same goes for the rich treasure of Christian literature, Bible distribution and work with the media. We have perhaps too often unthinkingly compared ourselves with the early church and overlooked the early church elements in others. Before God and man we have to recognize this. We too have to ask forgiveness. Looking back on our discussions, we can see: The controversial questions of doctrine were not cleared up by the brotherly reception accorded on both sides. But what is clear is that we may not take away from one another the right to formulate clearly and to present objections to false teaching, nor expect them to put aside the authority of the Holy Scriptures. But we have learnt so to say a *No!* which bears the marks of brotherly love, so that the cross of Christ is not emptied of its power nor the Holy Spirit quenched.

#### The Protestant State Churches and the Baptist Union in Luther Year

The work of this joint Commission has certainly been evident in the preparations for the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's birth and much that will be said then will therefore carry a particular emphasis.

We have asked ourselves in our Union what we owe to the

Reformation and to Martin Luther. We have discovered far more than his translation of the Bible, with which we were brought up, and his pithy sayings!

In a time when the Word of God had been forgotten and twisted, mixed up with pagan ideas and filled out with the rubbish of medieval church teaching, God called Martin Luther to be the Reformer. The four cornerstones with which Luther buttressed his 'new teaching' offered many people a firm foundation: By grace alone! By faith alone! Only the Holy Scriptures! Christ alone! By these many people found personal assurance of salvation. In a church which was formed by a hierarchy of autocratic priests, Luther taught the priesthood of all believers and introduced the eucharist in both elements for the laity also.

And ultimately he set in motion, indirectly by his works, the whole Baptist movement, for which even the Anabaptists were thankful to the Reformer. Luther strongly repulsed this appreciation.

Whether it be the high esteem with which the Bible is held, or justification by faith, or the authority of the local church - bit by bit we are encountering in our churches the biblical truths rediscovered by Martin Luther. Luther gave them new validity.

The Luther Year was officially opened on 4th May this year with a live radio and television service from the Wartburg, with more than a thousand participants. Against the wall of the south tower of the Wartburg, an altar was erected for the service. The Thuringian Bishop Werner Leich addressed the assembly from the altar and in a lively way spoke of the valuable contribution of the Reformer with some reference to the historical role of the south tower. He said:

From 4th May 1521, Luther lived in the Wartburg for 300 days and here he translated the New Testament into the German language. We thank God for this richly blessed work which he has given to church and people through his servant Martin Luther. But we shall not pass over in silence the fact that the Wartburg, in the name of the Reformation, has also seen much wrong. Twenty years after Luther's stay, the peasant, lay preacher and Anabaptist, Fritz Erbe, was thrown into the prison in the south tower of the Wartburg and lay there for nine years, every appeal refused, until he died in 1548. Thankfulness for the work of Martin Luther must be coupled with a plea for forgiveness for all that our fathers and we have done wrong in our enthusiasm for the Reformation. We offer this service, not with the self-satisfied attitude of a celebration, but in the humility with which we seek to be reconciled with those whom we have injured and united with those from whom we are separated...

Among the guests at this celebration were not only representatives of our Union, but also Dr Denton Lotz, representing the Baptist World Alliance. Dr Lotz, in his much appreciated word of greeting, said:

I have my doubts as to whether Martin Luther would feel at home in modern-day Protestantism! He would protest against our lethargy and lukewarm convictions. He would call for a new Reformation. He would begin with the first of his 95 theses - with the call of Christ as a call to continuing repentance. We can best honour Martin Luther if we set in motion a new Reformation of the Church - inclusive of all Christian confessions. That would be a Church which lives under the cross; a happy band which sings the songs of the gospel on the street corners and in the market places of our world; a courageous Church, which would reform the world as well as the Church; a revolutionary Church, which is for spiritual and social reform. It would be a Church which repents and decides to live righteously.

More than fifty years ago, the grandchild of a slave from Africa was born into a black Baptist family in Georgia. His parents dreamed that one day he would be a preacher of the gospel. They gave him the name of the great German Reformer. This boy was, of course, Martin Luther King Jr. His dream of the equality of all men started a revolution for human dignity and civil rights. His dream is part of the extension of the Reformation which was introduced by Martin Luther. Why? Because here too we are concerned with the rediscovery of that freedom which the gospel of Jesus Christ intended. Therefore let us honour Martin Luther by committing ourselves to this extension of the Reformation. Let us work for the unity of the Church and pray for it, and let us do the same for peace in the world and for the evangelisation of all peoples, so that every tongue may confess that Jesus Christ is Lord! Let us live life to the full in the sure hope that one day the lordship of the world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever (Rev.11.15)!

We thank God for Martin Luther! The long-playing record which was issued by the Protestant churches for Luther Year was of Christian hymns and contained a hymn from one of our Baptist composers, beginning:

*Make room, give way! God will begin anew!*

JÖRG SWOBODA