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translated by
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We Condemn

How Luther and 16th-Century Lutheranism

Condemned False Doctrine

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Preface to the English Edition

To issue in translation, but otherwise unchanged, a book first published a decade ago is a venture fraught with manifold risks. During this time scholarly research has not remained static. This is true both with reference to the historical antecedents of the subject matter and also with reference to the main chapters of the book. Quite apart from other circumstances, the fact that the author's teaching field has meanwhile become something very much different from church history and the history of dogma may serve at least in part to explain why the author found it impossible to subject the book to a needed revision. Yet the gracious and generally favorable reception accorded the study in its original German version has given the author the courage to permit the publication of an English edition in unaltered form.

For a better understanding of the book's purpose the reader is asked to bear two things in mind.

1. This strictly historical study has no intention of prejudging the dogmatic consideration that must be given to the questions concerning doctrinal and ecclesiastical fellowship. Undoubtedly these reflections in the history of theology demand an application as a matter of principle. However, this study cannot itself make this application, if only because this task will be relevant in ever new ways whenever it confronts a new situation, in the sense of the distinction which Ernst Sommerlath formulated between the "identity" of the church and her message and the "variability" which results from the church's openness for the changing historical scene. "Both, the church's identity with itself and its variability, connected with each other and related to each other, constitute the true continuity of the church without which its catholicity cannot be maintained" ("Die Katholizität der Kirche," in *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis. Festschrift fuer H. Lilje*, ed. G. Hoffmann and K. H. Rengstorf. Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1959, pp. 148–158).

2. As regards the theological and historical content of this book, the author is grateful to Hermann Sasse for his suggestions (*Lutherische Blaetter*, IX, 53 [1957], 46–51) and would like to call attention to at least two necessary supplementary items.

Werner Elert's important work *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, which appeared too late to be utilized by the author, should by all means be consulted for the historical background of the problem of condemnations in the early church. Elert's book not only contains important historical materials to supplement the author's study, but also demonstrates that significant parallels existed between the events of the fourth century and those of the sixteenth.

The author's investigation was thematically limited to the Lutheran churches of the 16th century. However, this horizon will be considerably enlarged if, as Sasse properly suggests, the history of the rejection of false teaching within the Reformed churches is included, in addition to a treatment of the Anabaptists and Antitrinitarians as well as the intra-Reformed controversies of a later date, especially in Holland and in England.

The author may be permitted to conclude these remarks for the English edition with the closing sentence of the Preface to the German edition: "As negative as the title may sound and the subject may appear to be, it was and is the purpose of this study to make a modest positive contribution to a better understanding among churches by means of this investigation of a controversial historical question."

Heidelberg, September 1965

Hans-Werner Gensichen

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Introduction

Any experience with, or consideration of, the theological and ecclesiastical problems involved in interdenominational relations must necessarily lead to reflection in two opposite directions: on the one hand, to that which binds the denominations together and, on the other hand, to that which separates them. We may find the accents to be quite unevenly distributed. A time in which the desire for church union is strong will consider the question concerning the factors which the churches have in common and which bind them together more important than concern about the divisive factors. An era of denominational self-sufficiency will pay more attention to erecting and defending barriers than to finding means of dialog and approach among churches. It will not be possible, of course, to place one side of the issue into the foreground without injury to the other. Such a procedure would do harm to the whole matter under discussion. Both honesty and objective consideration are endangered where the required double movement is cut short in favor of one of the two points of view. This is no less true for the interdenominational dialog. Both the experiences of centuries in the Lutheran-Reformed debate and the results of ecumenical endeavors to date have made it sufficiently clear that every serious disruption of the balance between these points of view has undeniably put the value of the interchange in doubt. Where for the sake of an ideal of unity men think they can bypass or delete the reality of divisive factors the results are generally no less unsatisfactory than in places where a scrupulous insistence on denominational peculiarities blurs the vision for what churches have in common.

Under such circumstances it would seem that the condemnatory judgments in the Lutheran Symbols, especially those directed against the Reformed, must give rise to the gravest misgivings. Does this not clearly represent a state of affairs that paralyzes a proper consideration of interdenominational relations and that brings the dialog to a dead end? Does this not clearly and seriously upset the desired balance affecting the method of discussion in the direction of making the divisive factors absolute? Does

not the fact of denominational division here lead to conclusions so radical that the possibility of a dialog becomes altogether illusory? How is it possible to engage in an honest discussion if one side begins by solemnly condemning the other side? And if, in answer to such questions, attention would be called to the fact that, after all, there has been an ongoing Lutheran-Reformed dialog, it could still be asserted in rebuttal that the Lutherans have not been completely faithful to the battle line drawn by the Lutheran Confessions.

If these misgivings are justified, it would be not only desirable but prerequisite for the interdenominational dialog of our day to be freed from the burden of those condemnations. Please note: Where this request is made today, it is not at all motivated by a falsely applied concept of tolerance as in the Enlightenment, which intentionally does away with every distinction between true and false doctrine and no longer dares to be sure of the thesis because it is afraid of the antithesis. Rather, this gives voice to the deep-seated concern that the specific rejections of Reformed teachings, as expressed in a part of the Lutheran Symbols, are no longer applicable to the confessional status of our time, so that their intensely serious verdict seems to be spoken into a vacuum. Is it perhaps possible that a repetition of these condemnations in our time will erect “church divisive” barriers in areas where only “theological” differences exist, or where, to quote Karl Barth, “the opposition of the earlier confessions of two churches has been made obsolete by a new and common confession and has become a mere difference in theological thinking”?¹ Consequently, is it possible that for the sake of a “pet theological theory that has run into a blind alley” we should deny church fellowship to those who are in truth our brethren?²

Certainly we must give these questions the most serious consideration. Even if the claim were made that since the confessional discussions of the Reformation age the situation of the theological dialog has not changed decisively in its essential points, we should have to ask all the more emphatically whether those marks of cleavage were not unjustly established already then and are therefore not all the more in need of removal. In any case we shall achieve clear results only if the doctrinal issues are themselves carefully examined. Unless we are badly mistaken, the disposition of this problem is still a long way off, and its solution dare not be prejudiced by premature decisions.

Without, however, becoming guilty of a premature judgment, we may certainly be permitted to consider the problem of pronouncing condemnations from another point of view, and indeed it may even be necessary to do so. Before the question regarding the significance and validity of the

individual doctrinal antitheses is decided and before the attempt is made to understand if and under what circumstances it is still possible to reaffirm the *Damnatus* of the Lutheran Symbols, another question should be considered. It will be necessary to ask what, exactly, these confessions meant with their words of condemnation, for what purpose they were spoken, and how they were understood and received. Without clarifying this historical question it will not be possible to provide a clean-cut decision regarding the present-day evaluation of condemnatory judgments.

The fact that the *Damnatus* has become a part of the Lutheran Symbols lends it a special dignity and isolates it from the countless number of private theological opinions. It may not be set aside as a disagreeable or irrelevant appendix. But this does not mean that it calls for blind acceptance, as if it were an unalterable and timelessly valid decision. Thus we are not somehow released from the obligation carefully to isolate the meaning of these condemnations within the framework of the conditions of their own time, of their relation to what precedes and what follows them, and last but not least, of their controversial character. Like the confession itself, the *Damnatus* stands beneath the double aspect which is described at the beginning and at the end of the Formula of Concord and which serves as the overarching span of the whole and holds it together: It is a witness in the presence of God, a confession for present and future generations, yes, in view of the judgment seat of Christ, and yet also, in sober awareness of their time-bound character, the confessional statements are “witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned.”³

It is this latter aspect with which a historical study must primarily concern itself. Without disrupting its connection with the first aspect, we may still allot to it due consideration, also in view of the problem connected with the condemnations. That is to say: A historical study cannot decide the question whether and to what extent the condemnations in the Lutheran Symbols can still become an “event” for us in such a way that we shall be bound by them in the presence of God and for all time. The study can only lead us up to that decisive question, but that much it can and should accomplish. It may have the confidence that nothing was in vain in the multi-layered and complicated history of the condemnations, including the often truly distasteful controversies that raged because of them. The historical approach surely may not offer this history as a collection of models for wrong and right conduct with respect to the problem of rejecting opposing

doctrine. It may hope, however, that all those battles and decisions have some relevance for the questions and answers of the present—just because they are concerned for the one truth of the Gospel, in spite of all human inadequacy and folly, and because even in these battles the connection with the history of the church as the body of Christ was never completely broken.

Notes to Introduction

¹ *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson, Harold Knight (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), Vol. I, Part 2, p. 632.

² Hans Joachim Iwand, "Lutherische Kirche?" *Evangelische Theologie*, 1947, p. 388.

³ Solid Declaration XII, 40; Epitome, Comprehensive Summary, 8. All quotations from the Lutheran Symbols are cited according to *The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. by Theodore G. Tappert, in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fischer, Arthur C. Piepkorn (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).

Part 1

The Antecedents

Chapter 1

The Anathemas in the Bible and in the Ancient Church

The rejection of false doctrines and false teachers is manifestly one of the points in which the Reformation has preserved a certain continuity with the pre-Reformation church. The *Damnatus* of the Lutheran Symbols clearly echoes the *Damnatus* or other rejection formulas by means of which the church had for centuries delimited itself against heresies. That this echo was not unintentional is evident already from a fleeting glance at, for example, the condemnations in the Augsburg Confession. Also the condemnatory judgments pronounced against the Reformed are apparently, according to their form and position in the confession, only a special case to begin with, in a long line of antitheses that must be traced back to the Middle Ages and to the ancient church. This does indeed presuppose that this continuity cannot be an unbroken one, since it, too, has received its normative principle from the new era brought about by Luther. Here, too, it is Luther's stature and work that form the connecting link with the old only by means of a decisive break. For a correct understanding of the Lutheran *Damnatus* attention must therefore be paid both to the points of contact and to the gaps between Luther's new approach and the heritage of pre-Reformation times.

At the same time it must not be overlooked that the condemnatory judgments of Luther and the Lutheran Church are always accompanied by references to Bible passages, so that also for the *Damnatus* the support of the Scriptures and the practice of the first church is claimed. This is not the place to investigate the validity of this claim in individual cases or to present a comprehensive study of the attack on false doctrine in the earliest days of Christianity. Still, one might be tempted to proceed from the New Testament anathema as the model for the condemnations of the church in later times

and draw a continuous line to the Lutheran Church. Such a procedure would soon demonstrate, however, that the anathema does not automatically furnish a sort of common denominator for the whole practice of condemnations from the Jewish synagog down to Lutheranism or even to the canon law of today. The Reformation anathema follows lines of development different from that of the past, though absorbing some of its essential features. Similarly, the Reformation anathema becomes the fountainhead of equally divergent currents in the future, which appropriate it and yet largely reshape its meaning.

The religio-historical context into which the Biblical anathema belongs is without question that of blessing and cursing.¹ But already in the Old Testament this framework is broken through. In the extra-Biblical world the curse is a “word of consecration,” which “requires no gods nor spirits to execute it”² and hence accomplishes in itself what it says, but this typically magical feature was already overcome in ancient Israel, at least as far as the “*cherem*” or “curse,” is concerned, which comes into consideration as the prototype of the anathema.³ Here it is not man who by his decree “evokes” constructive or destructive results, blessing or curse. Rather, the formula of excommunication merely confirms that a matter or a person has come irrevocably under God’s sentence. Thus the “banning” in the Old Testament is an explicit and conscious surrender to *God’s* disposal, especially to His wrath. The Septuagint uses other terms beside anathema to translate the Hebrew original. One such word is “destruction” (ἀπόλεια).⁴ This suggests an additional feature by which the Biblical “ban” is distinguished from extra-Biblical usage. The latter, as shown by the Greek curse-tablets of Megara, aims at partial damage to the person concerned, while the former deals with the possibility that God’s punitive action will become effective in its comprehensive destructive force.

Not until postexilic Judaism was the ban established in its religious and social setting in a way that became so significant for later times. The synagog or its representatives assume the authority to fix the boundaries of synagog fellowship by excommunication. The traditional formulas show that occasionally the thought of a magical operation of the curse may also be involved, but it never becomes decisively significant.⁵ The consciousness that the action is taken by God’s command and for His sake remains decisive. One who violates God’s honor by transgressing His law or by dishonoring His ambassadors has become subject to His punishment. For that very reason he can no longer be regarded as a full-fledged member of the synagog. For an evaluation of the New Testament anathema it is significant

that at this point a twofold development begins. One who has been placed under the ban is not yet outside the synagog like the heretics, who are entirely excluded⁶ and for whom there is no participation in eternal life but only the damnation of hell. Three times a day the Jew prayed, "Let no hope be given the apostates ... and may the heretics (*Minim*) perish in a moment."⁷ On the contrary, one who has been placed under the ban, simple or intensified, is by no means to be excommunicated from the synagog, but every effort is to be made to keep him and to lead him back to the *Torah*. In this way the ban obtains a "medicinal" sense. The punitive character is modified by the aim at improvement. The Old Testament surrender to God's judicial wrath, which removed the culprit from all human intervention, has become a means of communal discipline within the synagog.⁸ For centuries both lines of development run parallel in Judaism. Not until the beginning of the ninth century is there a combination of exclusion from the synagog and of the intensified ban.⁹

It is evident that against this background the New Testament anathema¹⁰ is seen to be bound up with, yet also to break through, the traditional framework. Neither ascribes any magical effect to the banning formula; in fact, Jesus forbids cursing as an invasion of God's prerogative. Neither in the Old nor in the New Testament is it a man or a community of men who make the disposal, but the matter is turned over to God. For both periods the anathema reveals the profound cleavage between God and man, a cleavage that is bound to have its consequences also for human fellowships. But all of this takes place under basically changed presuppositions. "From its Old Testament roots the Biblical anathema grows out of the conviction of the pious man that he is obligated to separate himself from the impious man for the preservation of God's honor according to the measure of the revelation of His will in the Law. Hence the anathema presupposes the finality of the Torah-piety. By revealing God as the Father of mercies Jesus rejected this kind of anathema."¹¹ Jesus Himself stepped into the breach between God and man. It is now no longer a matter of God's rightful judgment asserting itself, but of His grace.

Precisely for this reason the anathema has not been abolished in the New Testament fellowship. It becomes the mark of separation that is in force when the saving fellowship with God is sought in some other place than in the fellowship with Christ and His body, in other words, when the finality of Christ's redemptive act is knowingly and intentionally attacked within the community. The manner in which the New Testament speaks of

the anathema¹² shows that it involves an extreme case, something that should not be possible in Christ's community at all. Occasionally the matter itself is spoken of without using the term "anathema"¹³—perhaps to avoid any impression of resorting to a curse that works by magic, or of taking disciplinary measures that might be placed on a level with the ban executed within the synagog.¹⁴ For where the anathema becomes operative the means of pastoral guidance and discipline have been exhausted. It is at this point that the New Testament anathema goes beyond the application of the ban in the synagog, while it might still be compared with the act of exclusion from the synagog (although the term "*cherem*," which corresponds to "anathema," is not used). The New Testament anathema is exclusively "a protective device, not a disciplinary measure."¹⁵ It is a protective measure which may be necessary for the sake of the community if its foundation has been attacked. It declares that the culprit has placed himself outside the fellowship of the body of Christ (Tit. 3:10f.). The fact that the community can be in the position of giving expression to this state of affairs is nothing else than the final consequence of an uncompromising faith in the one Lord—of that faith which the Lord Himself creates in His community and which He must now also expect of His disciples. Thus also in the New Testament thesis and antithesis are inseparable.

It belongs to the nature of the "extreme case" pictured above that it by no means applies to *all* situations in which schisms (αἰρέσεις) upset and disturb the community, and certainly not in cases where one of its members falls prey to "works of the flesh" and repudiates his calling by disobedience in life and activity. The situation in Corinth, for example, that Paul had in view when he wrote his first letter to that church, is clearly characterized by certain cleavages, but Paul does not feel driven to such drastic polemics as against the Galatian false teachers. The distinction between errors that threaten the foundation of the church and going astray in less weighty matters, in general the distinction between false teaching and mistaken belief, between heresy and erroneous opinion, so important later on, is in any case suggested already in the New Testament¹⁶ and is to be presupposed for an understanding of the anathema. It is true, the anathema in its essence leaves no room for a distinction between persons and things, a matter that created problems for the 16th century and later. This is so because the anathema is not to be regarded as a human action in which the scope of its validity could be limited, but its purpose is to place the whole man before the face of God. In this connection the New Testament knows just as little about a conflict between truth and love. "Truth (ἀλήθεια) is possessed only

in the circuit of the divine love (ἀγάπη), and love only in the ἀλήθεια of the divine truth of the saving revelation.”¹⁷ The anathema, too, has its place in the area of “doing the truth” and therefore does not violate the boundaries set by the law of love.

In view of the fact that the New Testament anathema is so closely linked with the truth and the reality of the revelation of Christ and receives its justification and its dimensions from this revelation alone, the question would naturally arise in the course of the church’s emergence concerning the norm and decisive court which were available for such a verdict. It will hardly do to speak quite so confidently, as is done in Roman Catholic circles,¹⁸ of the “principle of authority promoted by Paul” and of the “doctrine that has been handed down from the beginning” as of the weapons that have been effective in primitive Christianity and up to the present for the fight against heretics. The oldest history of the church shows how fluid the boundaries could be between “orthodoxy” and heresy.¹⁹ We must, of course, beware of relativizing too freely. False doctrine in primitive Christianity is surely not only what was subsequently labeled as such by the victorious party in the controversies of the first centuries. The contrast between false doctrine and orthodoxy already permeates the New Testament itself. Certainly rival groups engaged in church politics and fighting for control have left their traces and thus blur the original picture. But it is equally certain that the “doctrine” the heretics attacked did not come into being and maintain itself merely by virtue of the law of the victor. Regardless of how the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles is viewed, what they call “sound doctrine” was in essence present and known already in the oldest Christian communities, even where they were not aware of any immediate threat from false doctrines. The early development of confessional formulas, which are certainly not rooted only in the attempt to combat heresy,²⁰ shows that faith has an urge to find expression and formulation in words, without necessarily falling prey to becoming frozen in doctrinal formulas. Also the use of the term ἀλήθεια (“truth”) in Paul’s epistles (e. g., 2 Thess. 2:10ff.; Gal. 5:7; 2 Cor. 6:7; 13:8; etc.) grants insight into this quite self-evident linking of the reality of the new life experienced by faith with its expression in the new doctrine, which must then also be fenced off from other doctrines and must for that very reason press for a normative, authoritative formulation.²¹ To do justice to the further development of the church’s war on false doctrine it will be necessary not to underestimate all this and not to overemphasize unnecessarily the cleavage between the alleged “elasticity of the Pauline spirit,” his “tolerance ... which regards